

Nonprofit Board Governance: Challenges of Inclusivity & Voice

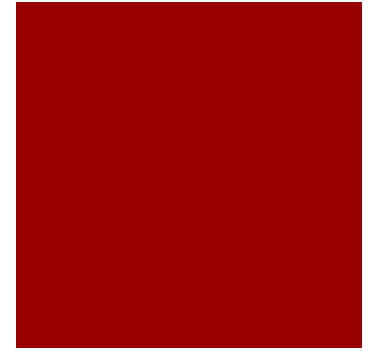
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Nonprofit Governance



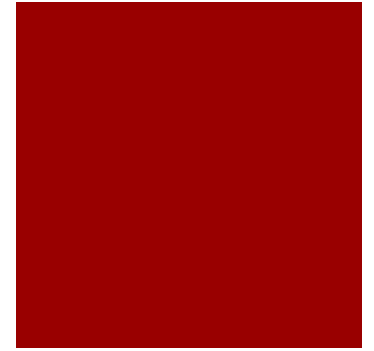
“Nonprofit governance is the process of providing strategic leadership to a nonprofit organization. It entails the functions of setting direction, making policy and strategy decisions, overseeing and monitoring organizational performance, and ensuring overall accountability” (Renz, 2007)

Stakeholder Theory

- Nonprofit stakeholders include:
 - Board Members
 - ED and staff
 - Volunteers
 - Clients/consumers
 - Donors/funders
 - Government
 - Community

Interests may be economic, legal or moral (Tschirhart, 1996)

Stakeholder Theory (cont'd)



- Boards have a responsibility to govern in the interests of both the organization and its stakeholders (Freeman, 1984)
- There are often significant disparities between the demographic composition of boards and other stakeholders (Stone & Ostrower, 2007)

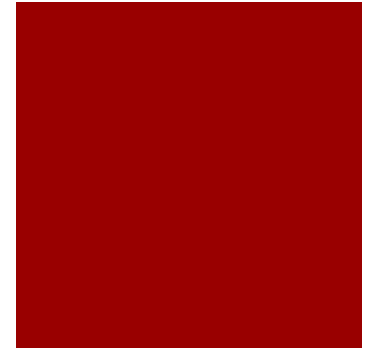
Modes of Governance

- **Fiduciary** – fiscal oversight; ensuring adequate resources and effective management of those resources
- **Strategic** – Envisioning and shaping the organization's future; sustainability; achieving mission
- **Generative** - Reflective practice, reframing problems, and collective sense making, which foster board learning and in turn, the development of creative and innovative solutions to issues before the board (Chait, Ryan, & Taylor, 2005)

Purpose

To examine the discourse of nonprofit board meetings and board member interviews to understand the challenges and opportunities associated with inclusivity and voice in nonprofit governance

Research Questions

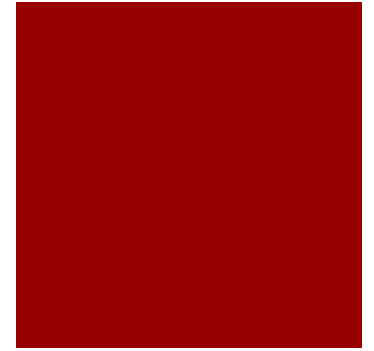


- RQ1: *How does nonprofit board communication privilege some stakeholders' voices over others?*
- RQ2: *How does nonprofit board communication privilege some board member voices over others?*

Method

- Naturalistic data from a year with four nonprofit organizations
 - Heath: All-volunteer board; 12 members
 - Health: ED & 1 staff member; 12 board members
 - Social Service; ED, 9 staff; 14 board members
 - Social Service; ED, 10 staff; 12 board members
- Data Collection
 - Observations of all board meetings, 2007-2008
 - Interviews, documents (agendas/minutes, etc.)
 - *800 pages of transcripts*

RQ1: How does board meeting communication privilege some stakeholders' voices over others?

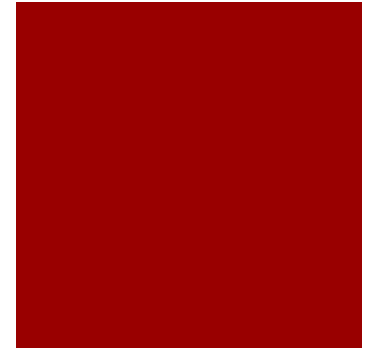


- Who is in the conversation?
- How are board members recruited?
- Are staff included in the discussion?

From Interview :

- Q: Did anybody go out of their way to give you information about what your role would be once you were there or like when you think back to your first meeting did you feel welcome or included or someone said, “Hey, this is how it works”.
- A: Yeah. I mean, a little, not much. I guess the only direction I got was to pick a committee. And I tell you a big thing is that I learned a ton last week at the strategy sessions [with staff]. So I mean I kind said, you know, I wish we had had this meeting earlier.

RQ2: How does board meeting communication privilege some board member voices over others?



- Dominant sub-groups
- Privileging efficiency over effectiveness
- Privileging group harmony over conflict & deliberation

Dominant Sub-Groups

- “I think there are two or three board members that are a lot more vocal, just in their personalities. And they tend to dominate the discussion and the rest of the board members just go with the flow.”
- “It seems like there is a dynamic associated with those folks who know each other from Raleigh and who can bring money in. I’m a small town girl who doesn’t really know where to raise money. I felt like they know each other really well. I was intimidated. I’ve gotten over that. I’ve gotten more confident in my own ability to contribute. “

Efficiency over effectiveness



- **Member:** Is this something we need to make a decision on this month, or should we consider tabling it *since it's for some of us just coming up new?* I see three options - to accept, to reject, or table it 'til next month.
- **Chair:** Well, the reason that it's a problem to table it, um although I guess she's willing to do that, 'cause she did say we don't *have* to make a decision, but there are [other groups] contacting her,...wanting to make arrangements for spring dates... So if we wait until March the 20 whatever...The windows to make those scheduling dates is going to be gone.

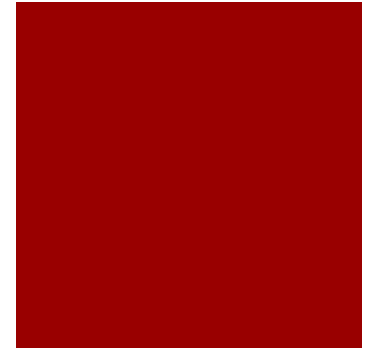
Privileging harmony

- “So what happens is that you say something that may be controversial in some individual’s mind. They may disagree with it. Then they’ll come back with, well, here is my side of it and I don’t think that’s right. And it seems like we’ve got conflict here. Now this is going to get good. Right? And then the deal will be that one of the two immediately will back down. And someone will come in as the harmonizer and say ‘you all are saying the same thing,’ but the thing is, they’re not.”

Other Process Examples

- Limited requests for participation –high proportion of agreement compared to disagreement
- Defending the ED/CEO
- “Calling the question” prematurely or “tabling” conversation when there is intense discussion.
- Emphasis on time: “we only have 10 more minutes”
- Placing more controversial issues at the end of the agenda.

Implications for Future Research



Future research should explicitly examine the tensions that need to be balanced and how we can be more inclusive in group communication:

- Short Term and Long Term needs
- Cohesiveness and Difference
- Stability and Innovation

Implications for Practice

- Intentional recruiting and orientation of board members that represent different stakeholders and perspectives; mentoring
- Acknowledgement of discomfort with conflict and a process for addressing difficult issues, such as:
 - Use acknowledgement/face-supportive communication during times of conflict.
 - Focus on the task rather than attacking others
 - Minimize interruption
- Ask members for their input:
 - Avoid privileging the input of old timers over new members
 - Create an environment that respects the views of all members
- Reconsider construction of agendas to prioritize topics that need discussion & create space for deliberation

Resources

- Bradshaw, P. & Fredette, C. (2011). *The Inclusive Nonprofit Boardroom. The Nonprofit Quarterly Spring 2011.*
- Chait, R. P., Ryan, W. P., & Taylor, B. E. (2005). *Governance as leadership: Reframing the work of nonprofits.* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
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- Metelsky, B. A. & Jameson, J. K. (2013). Generative communication: Fostering generative governance through diverse perspectives. In T. Tempkin (ed.), *You and your board: Advice and Practical Tips from the Field's Top Practitioners, Researchers, and Provocateurs.* Charity Channel Press.
- Stone, M. M., & Ostrower, F. (2007). Acting in the public interest: Another look at research on nonprofit governance. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 36*(3), 416-438.