Community Engagement Governance:  
A New System-Wide Governance Model for Community Impact  
A Participatory Action Research Study  

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Abstract

It has become increasingly clear within the sector that traditional governance models are inadequate to effectively respond to the challenges faced by many nonprofits and their communities. Traditional governance models utilized by most nonprofits often prevent them from being effective and diminish their connection and accountability to those they serve. The nonprofit sector, above all, should be the place that fosters and advances democracy and self-determination, and this must go deeper than just advocating for its value outside nonprofits. If nonprofit organizations are to be truly accountable to their communities and constituencies, democracy must be at their core. In fact, by and large, the nonprofit sector has tended to replicate structures and processes that do not foster democracy within organizations. Rather, traditional governance models, based on outdated top-down “command and control” paradigms, still dominate. Such hierarchical structures not only run counter to democratic values and ideals, they often impede an organization’s efforts to achieve its goals and ultimately fulfill its mission. If those who are directly affected by an organization’s actions are not included in key decision-making processes, the nonprofit risks arriving at conclusions or decisions that are incongruent with both its constituents’ needs, and its own mission.

Community-Engagement Governance™ is an innovative approach to governance, built on participatory and democratic principles, that moves beyond the board of directors as the sole locus of governance. It is a framework in which responsibility for governance is shared across the organization by all key stakeholders: not only the board, but also the staff, the constituents and the community. Further, the Framework is based on principles of participatory democracy, self-determination, shared power and leadership, genuine partnership, and community-level decision-making. The Framework helps organizations and networks become more responsive to their constituents’ and communities’ needs, and to become more adaptive to the changing environment these organizations face. Because no one governance model fits all organizations, the Framework sets out design principles, rather than a model, so that governance structures and process can be customized by each organization or network depending on their circumstances and unique characteristics.

Since the presentation at the 2011 conference, the Action Research Project has expanded by the number of participating organizations and networks and deepened by its methodology. The organizations represent a wide range national, state, and community-based organizations, coalitions, and networks. The methodology includes qualitative data through a series of semi-structured interviews and on-line surveys with a cross-section of stakeholders in the participating organizations at different phases of preparation, design, and implementation. Preliminary findings will be presented and include: a) increased responsiveness to environmental changes; b) ability to be more proactive and adaptive, c) increased quality and efficiency of governance decision-making, and; d) increased diversification and support of new leadership.