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.

Community Engagement Governance™: Beyond the Board as the Sole Locus of Governance

Community Engagement Governance™ is a new, 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, and because many variables such as mission, constituency, organizational development stage, etc. (Bradshaw, 2009), will influence what design will be most effective, this Framework is meant to be customized for each organization.

Action Research Study:

Since our presentation at the 2013 governance conference, the action research project has expanded by the number and diversity of participating organizations and networks, deepened by its methodology, and explored additional research questions. We will present new findings and their implications for further research. The key research questions are as follows:

- How does the transformation to Community Engagement Governance™ affect an organization/network’s ability to be more accountable and responsive to the community it serves?
- How does adapting the Framework affect the quality and efficiency of decision-making by an organization or network?
- What community-level changes can be attributable to this Framework?
- What is the range of structures and decision-making methodologies for effective system-wide governance?
- Are there governance decisions that must be made at the board level and nowhere else, or does this depend upon an organization’s unique circumstances?
- What are the most effective coordinating bodies for determining the locus for decisions; which decisions should be shared, and how?
- What changes have occurred for the boards as a result of adopting a new governance design?
- What core competencies are prerequisites for success in using this Framework?
- Does this Framework work for all types of nonprofits and networks?
- What are the most significant challenges for organizations and networks adapting this Framework?
- What are the factors (individual, group, political and environmental dimensions) that make it difficult for some boards to be willing to share power with their constituents and stakeholders?