Exploring the Rhetorical Foundations of Board Governance: Market-Based Strategies versus Common Good Claims in Five Nonprofit Organizations
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Abstract

The last several years have seen a renewed emphasis on ensuring nonprofit organization efficiency and effectiveness. Predictably in a political economy in which belief in the market is so strong, many advocates of such views have advanced the idea that to secure improved fiduciary and programmatic accountability, nonprofit organizations need only adopt more “business-like” (read more market-driven) governance and management strategies. Such a stance leads board members and executive directors alike to press for accountability strategies that enshrine efficiency as a cardinal aim and that, implicitly at least suggest that there is no distinction between the missions and governance of for-profit and nonprofit organizations. We are interested in exploring how governing board members and executive directors assimilate such claims when determining the governance strategies they adopt. Are governance strategies framed in market-based rhetoric? Do governors distinguish between their nonprofit missions and market-based claims for management and accountability change strategies or simply assume the efficacy of the latter? More deeply, do trustees, many of whom are drawn from market institutions, recognize a distinction in the social roles of these institutions in the first instance?

To begin to address these large looming questions, we propose to interview trustees and executive directors from a sample of five (5) local nonprofit organizations that differ by subsector (social welfare, health, education, philanthropy) and size to determine how they perceive and articulate the appropriateness of market based claims to describe how they may secure increased accountability to their stakeholders and to secure their mission aims more completely. As we develop our semi-structured interview instrument, we will be particularly interested in examining the rhetoric our interviewees employ to understand better how they conceive of the roles of their nonprofit organizations. Accordingly, we will record our key informant interviews and examine those transcripts for how governors and leaders frame their strategies rhetorically. We will also parse our interview data for evidence of how these leaders and managers envisage the social roles of their organizations. As such, we hope, at least inferentially, to determine how these key leaders are imagining their leadership roles. Do they see these as obtaining efficiency of operations or as securing broader social aims? Even if they argue the latter position, do they argue that their leadership roles need to be different to address them since they are engaged in nonprofit work or do they, instead, simply adopt the same strategies developed for market organizations? We plan to draw our sample organizations from the Roanoke and New River Valleys of Virginia. Our case organizations will likely include these or similar entities:

- Beans and Rice
- Western Virginia Food Bank
- New River Valley Community Foundation
- Blacksburg New School
- Bradley Free Clinic
- Total Action Against Poverty
- Literacy Volunteers of the Roanoke Valley
- Easter Seals of Western Virginia

We will seek to ensure the anonymity of our final selected participating organizations.

References


