


## GOVERNING (NOT MANAGING)

### THE LIBRARY

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It seems like many years since anyone considered a library merely to be a place with books, or a librarian just a person who checks them out.

But it is a reasonably safe bet that conceptions of the position and role of the library board have been largely unchanged for generations. Libraries inhabit a world of rapidly changing possibilities and expectations; their staffs must continually update their technologies, knowledge and practice. In this environment, it is daunting that the technology of governance is unlikely to have advanced at all. Today's library boards do much the same as their predecessors: they hear reports, listen to staff recommendations, attempt to help the staff with staff jobs, form committees, attend to emergent issues, and generally carry out a reactive role.

Governance is the most underdeveloped discipline in the management spectrum; a fact both inexplicable and dismaying when one considers the power of the governing board and its weighty accountabilities. The board is, after all, accountable for the library or library system it governs and is the initial holder of all legitimate authority in the entire organization. No one else has authority until the board delegates some of its power. How this delegation occurs has huge implications for the organization, its customers and employees.

Perhaps the central question for any governing board concerns the manner of delegating authority so that the organization can be effectively, responsibly and creatively managed, while at the same time preserving the board's legitimate right and obligation to control the organization. Historically, the question has been answered by board practices such as approvals (read: don't do anything until we have authorized it) and the routine review and acceptance of reports (read: judged against criteria rarely made explicit). These time-honored techniques force the board to react to the staff, cause the board to follow rather than lead, and drive the board into enough details that careful attention to the big picture is a rare event in the boardroom.

The Policy Governance model—now a worldwide phenomenon, created by the senior author but demonstrated first in Indiana—offers boards a more powerful and systematic approach. The model ensures sufficient board control, but in such a way as to allow staff an area in which their own creativity may and even must be used. But this true revolution in board capability requires boards to make major changes from the traditional ways they have con-

ceived their roles and calls upon them to engage in a type of decision making that is quite foreign to the conventional wisdom.

Policy Governance begins by recognizing that the board of any enterprise is, on behalf of the owners of that enterprise, accountable for organizational success. Two terms need definition here. *Owners*: Libraries don't have owners in the same way that corporations have stockholders, but can nonetheless regard the legitimacy base of the board, the group to which the board owes allegiance and on whose behalf it speaks, as the ownership of the library. For public libraries, this ownership group is the general public. *Success*: To get success, the board must first define it. The board must state its expectations for organizational achievement and conduct, expectations that are then couched as job requirements to the chief executive officer (CEO).

Board expectations that define success are developed by Policy Governance boards in two ways. The first—which here we will refer to as “Ends”—describe the change, outcome or benefit that the library is intended to have in the lives of its consumers. Ends also describe the people who are intended to benefit from the outcomes, along with the acceptable cost or desired priority of the benefits. Ends prescribed by the board, then, answer the questions “what consumer results?” will be achieved for “which consumers?” and “at what cost?” It is hard to imagine a more important task to be carried out in the public interest than this designation of purpose; it is as if the library board is acting as purchasing agent of the community. Hence the board clearly informs the CEO of its requirements in terms of the library's accomplishment of purpose. But unlike most goal-setting, the approach here is in terms of actual consumer results, not mere staff activities no matter how important.

Of course, any library board recognizes that public relations strategies, software acquisition, catalogues, good budgeting, and personnel decisions are important; well managed, all these play an important role in accomplishing the real purpose of the library (as expressed in our “ends” concept). Yet no library exists for budgeting, personnel, data processing, or paying bills on time. These are important matters, to be sure, but the quality of governance is imperiled if they are confused with Ends. Library practices, activities, programs, plans, and renovations are not Ends issues because they do not directly designate the consumer result, the recipient of the result or the worth of the result. In Policy Governance, organizational issues which are not

Ends issues are called "means" issues. But whatever they are called, a library board must acknowledge its accountability for means as much as for Ends. Accordingly, the board must establish some control over means as well as Ends.

Unlike board control over Ends, control by Policy Governance boards over the operational means of the library takes an unusual form. Since most means are, in fact, justified by the ends—the most rigorous test of means is that they work—there is no need for the board to control most of them. But every board knows that there are means that may be effective, but are nonetheless unacceptable. The unacceptability generally lies in their being imprudent or unethical. In Policy Governance, the board identifies the unacceptable means, empowering the CEO to use whatever means work except those the board has put off limits (recorded in brief documents we will call Executive Limitations). Thus, the board refuses to intrude upon management's deciding how to get the job done, yet does not lose control where control is necessary. This unusual method, taken together with rigorous clarity about the Ends, yields not only mercifully brief board documents, but maximizes both managerial flexibility and managerial accountability.

The governing board of a library that uses the Policy Governance model, therefore, has two sets of instructions to its CEO: instructions that describe the Ends to be accomplished, and those that describe the means to be avoided. Additionally, the board creates two sets of instructions for itself. The first establishes how the board will conceive of and carry out its own job, codifies board discipline, sets expectations for its members, empowers the chair, clarifies committees, and controls agendas (we will call this category Governance Process). The second describes the board's relationship to its CEO, its manner of delegation, and the way in which it will monitor CEO performance (we will call this category Board-Staff Linkage).

Most Policy Governance boards choose to use the word *policies* to refer to statements made in these four categories of board decision-making. But because the topics of Ends, Executive Limitations, Governance Process, and Board-Staff Linkage are exhaustive (beyond bylaws, there is nothing else a board must decide), contained within them are an uncountable number of decisions. It would be impossible for any board to address itself to all issues, large and small, in these categories. Policy Governance deals with this dilemma by guiding a board to identify the broadest issue in each category and

to decide upon this issue before moving into finer detail. Smaller issues, inasmuch as they are always "contained within" larger issues, are thereby controlled, even though decisions about them can be delegated. A physical demonstration of this type of control is seen anytime someone picks up a nested set of anything—direct control over the more inclusive element enables indirect control over subsidiary elements. Thus, after it has made the broader decisions, the board can confidently delegate to

the CEO all further decisions within Ends and within operational means constrained by Executive Limitations. It can similarly delegate to the board chair all further decisions within Governance Process and Board-Staff Linkage.

This system of setting expectations allows the board to clearly distinguish the CEO's job from that of the board, a crucial distinction if the library board is to hold its CEO accountable for the library's success. It establishes the board as a body whose role is not to help or advise the staff but rather to carefully define the job which the staff exists to perform. In short, the board's job is not to help manage, but to govern.

No board can fairly hold its staff accountable for meeting expectations if it has failed to state them. Setting out board

expectations in writing, as required under Policy Governance, provides far more clarity than most CEOs and boards are used to. If this clarity is to be achieved and maintained, however, board discipline is crucial. Let us consider some aspects of that discipline, codified in policies established in the Governance Process and Board-Staff Linkage categories.

The authority of a board is held as a group, not as individuals. Traditionally accepted board operation honors this more in the breach than in real observance. The Policy Governance model, which takes the group wholeness of the board very seriously, protects the integrity of the board as a body by assuring the CEO that the only binding instructions are those passed by the board—never those issued by individual board members or even groups of board members. This requirement for the board to "speak with one voice," a necessity to prevent individuals on the board from overruling the authority of the board, necessitates some structural arrangements that differ markedly from the arrangements traditional boards take for granted.

For example, no officers or committees are ever given assignments that would involve them in the work of staff, for if they were, they would be in a position to instruct or influence staff decisions either in a contrary direction or simply in more detail than the board chose to

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(thereby unilaterally limiting staff prerogatives). Traditional boards will involve themselves or parts of themselves deeply in staff work, losing the ability to fairly hold the staff accountable for the work. Boards using Policy Governance create committees only to help the board do board work, never to help staff with its work. Board members who worry that the staff may need help or advice should remember that staff are perfectly capable of identifying their own need for help, especially when the job requirements are clear. Nothing stops staff members seeking the advice of any person (or committee of persons) that the staff member chooses to ask for help.

It is worth noting that advice is useful and works well when the mechanism for advice is in the hands of the individual who wants it. That person can seek advice, hear advice, accept or reject advice, and still be accountable for his or her decision. If the mechanism of advice is in the hands of a more powerful party who wishes to be an advisor, it is hard to know if it works or not. Staff will invariably pretend that the committee foisted onto them by the board is indispensable. Advice and instruction are indistinguishable when coming from a source with more authority than the recipient. Policy Governance boards know that their staffs will likely put together their own committees and even possibly invite board members to serve on them. But they measure staff success not by the use they make of political mechanisms, but by the extent to which Ends are accomplished and unacceptable means avoided.

Modern libraries have changed beyond recognition in very few decades. If their boards are truly to lead them in the fast-moving world of information, they must abandon their traditional, reactive, and undeveloped governance methods. They must adopt a governance system that requires them to represent the public in deciding the purpose of the library, allows them to delegate powerfully and safely to an accountable professional staff, and to focus rigorously on responsibly obtained results.

## THE AUTHORS

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