



BOARD LEADERSHIP

INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO GOVERNANCE

You Can't Create Ends Without a Different Kind of Thinking - Part II

By Karen Fryday-Field June 19, 2013

IN THE GOVERNANCE context, Chait, Ryan, and Taylor have described generative thinking as thinking focused on purpose.¹ In the Policy Governance context, it is “thinking that challenges the status quo and thinking that disrupts the alignment of the current reality with a look at a desired future.”² It represents primarily right brain thinking, or creative, intuitive, imaginative, and emotional thinking. A board engaged in generative thinking will have a collective inquiring mind about what is happening outside the organization, always enlarging and updating its area of awareness.³

Generative thinking boards use “what-if” questions—for example:

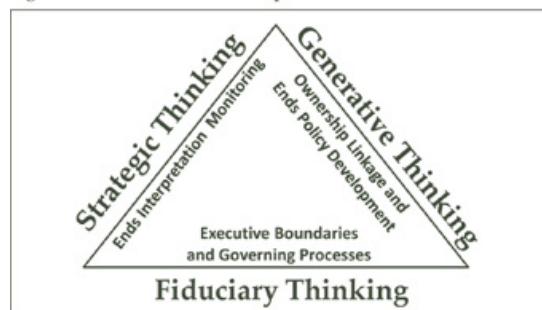
- What if we extended our mandate to include children and not just adults as beneficiaries?
- What if we decided we need to double the return on the investment?
- What if we moved the results component of our Ends from “reduced disease” to “eliminated disease”?

These questions, which offer a form of sensitivity analysis, allow the board to explore the nature of the challenge or need it is addressing or would like to address. Here are some more examples of generative governance discussion questions:

- What results for which people would our ownership want?
- What impact should we be having? Why that impact?
- Why should we be the organization to tackle that specific need? Why should we not be?
- What if we thought about alternative hypotheses?
- What if we see the needs in our community differently and turn them upside down to see these needs in a new light?
- Are our desired Ends lined up with our values and beliefs?
- Whom do we serve? Whom should we serve?
- Whom would we serve if money did not matter?
- What needs are growing?
- What do others think or know that we need to know?
- How would a divergent thinker see our challenges?

Figure 1 outlines three types of board thinking that Chait, Ryan, and Taylor identified: strategic, generative, and fiduciary. Policy Governance offers the practical solution and tools to act on these three modes of governance.

Figure 1: Governance as Leadership



Source: Adapted from Chait, R., Ryan, W., and Taylor, B. *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Non-Profit Boards* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2005).

At first blush, these questions do not seem highly complex or difficult. Why, then, do boards frequently get stuck when trying to articulate their Ends? The answer lies in how they think and how they prepare to think.

There are at least five key strategies related to the thinking work of the board in developing or refreshing Ends policies.

Strategy 1: Feed the Board's Brain

If the board is going to build a collective ambition for the organization in the form of Ends policies, its collective brain will need to acquire information to begin this process. Here are some examples of the types of environmental scanning information that the board needs to gather for Ends development (and note that if the board's ideas are not written down within twenty-four hours, most of them will be forgotten):

- What do our owners believe should be the Ends focus of the organization?
- What Ends questions or issues have come up at board meetings throughout the year?
- What result are we already achieving, for what groups, and at what worth (cost or priority)?
- What are the size and scope of the needs being served? Are these needs evolving? Are the beneficiaries changing? Are any new needs emerging?
- What is happening politically, environmentally, socially, or technologically that could or should have an impact on our Ends?
- What are our collaborators and competitors achieving in the marketplace?

Whenever possible, board members should be able to read this information in advance in order to synthesize and digest the content.

Strategy 2: Create Focus on the Generative Ends Process

Our human minds do not jump very well from fiduciary thinking (the work that goes into establishing, updating, and monitoring wise limitations on means) to generative (creative) thinking. Therefore, we need to pay attention to creating an environment conducive to creative thought.

Children rank high in creativity before entering school, but by age seven, only 10 percent rank naturally high in creativity and only 2 percent of adults are considered naturally creative.⁴ Our creativity is not gone when we grow up; it is just squelched or buried by the more common left brain activities in which we engage every day.

If your board is about to embark on Ends work, do it as part of a focused, creative meeting where the sole purpose is to synthesize and create new thinking. There is an abundance of tools available on the Internet for stimulating creative thinking (for example at www.mindtools.com) and an external facilitator can help inject new energy. Avoid cluttering the meeting with important left brain work, which can smother the right brain's innovative thinking.

This process can look quite different compared to a traditional board meeting. No regular business is addressed. Several boards are rising to this challenge by rotating their board meetings with fiduciary work at one meeting and creative, innovative Ends work at the next.

Strategy 3: Take Time to Let the Ends Thinking Percolate

Recent research in brain science has revealed an important finding: we vastly overrate our conscious minds. It has been said that only 4 percent of our brain is dedicated to conscious decision making. A vastly greater proportion is used to unconsciously distill and digest information.⁵

We have all experienced this phenomenon. You leave the office, and as you walk or drive home, the answer to an earlier challenge of the day pops into your head. Or while you are relaxing on the beach, a great new idea strikes you. It is because you stopped working on the problem with the 4 percent of your mind giving the rest of it an opportunity to work on the issue.

M. J. Ryan describes this phenomenon when working with writers who are inspired to begin writing their book and then suddenly find themselves needing to tidy the garden or shine their shoes.⁶ This would be followed by a period of successful writing. Mindless activity is now understood as an essential part of the creative process.

How does this relate to the board's work on Ends? Rather than forcing important policy decisions in one sitting, boards need to schedule enough time for their members to mull over decisions. I have often seen boards struggle over what benefit their organization should achieve in addressing a specific need. I recall a primary school board struggling with the realization that it is just one part of a wider benefit creation process because, after all, students move on to secondary education. After the first heated debate on how to express its Ends, the board took a break. One week later when they reconvened, five of twelve school board trustees had each independently landed on a high-level End that said, "The ABC school exists so that the students have the necessary skills and knowledge for successful transition to the next stage of their lives and education." All five trustees explained their aha! moments had come to them away from the board table.

Strategy 4: Recruit People Who Want to Think Generatively About Ends

Directors are often recruited to the board table because they have been highly effective managers. Many have highly developed "see-a-snake, kill-a-snake" skills. However, the skills that create a successful senior manager are not necessarily directly transferable to being a great governor. For the work of governing, boards must seek out people who are very interested in "thinking" work, not just "doing" work.

When boards or individual directors are not performing well, it is often thought to be because they are unclear about their duties. Chait, Ryan, and Taylor hypothesize that boards suffer from a problem of purpose, not performance.⁷ The challenge is that boards do not see their current work as meaningful. In other words, as the work of the board becomes truly more consequential, more meaningful, and more influential, the performance of the board will rise (see Table 1). The Policy Governance system has demonstrated this for over thirty-five years. When the board focuses on the desired impact of the organization, there is a distinct sense of meaningful contribution. The board can create this ongoing sense of meaningful purpose by perpetually scanning and evaluating the relevance and impact of their Ends.

Strategy 5: Build the Board's Creative, Innovative, and Risk-Taking Skills

Creative thinking is fundamental to Ends policy development. Herein lies an opportunity for boards to learn to collectively build their skills to create innovative Ends policies.

You may be familiar with the negative perspectives about Ends challenges that can sometimes emerge around the boardroom table. They sound like this:

"Oh no, a problem!" The board's reaction to the problem is often a bigger problem than the original challenge itself.

"Our organization can't take that End on. Maybe someone else [or some other organization] can solve that challenge but we can't!"

"It can't be done." In effect, this is surrendering before the battle even begins. The board assumes the challenge is too big to tackle, or the problem cannot be solved. When the board gives up on a need before even starting to think about it, "It can't be done" becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"We might fail! If we set out Ends too aggressively, our organization might fail, and we on the board will look bad."

Creative thinking is not natural for adults, and yet collective creative thinking is crucial for boards in developing Ends. Here are some characteristics of creatively thinking, innovative boards:

- They push up against the traditional boundaries of the needs the organization has traditionally served.
- They have a wide range of knowledge about the sector in which they are governing.
- They will attack the need in society with multiple perspectives and divergent thinking.
- They have a future orientation and see the possibilities.
- They adopt a reasonable risk-taking approach.
- They have confidence in their Ends decisions.

The biggest risk that the board can take is not to take any strategic risk at all. A board's worst mistake would be to fail to meet some important needs and create the needed impact in the world because it was unwilling to take any risk in stretching the organization with its Ends policies. Indeed, in my view, avoidance of generative thinking and unwillingness to declare ambitious Ends is one of our most prevalent failings in governance.

Many boards see their primary role to be the overseer, the fiduciary steward of the organization that they are governing. Policy Governance, however, sees the role as significantly more than scrutinizing the operation and stewarding resources. The board's more meaningful job is to ensure those resources achieve an owner-informed outcome for a defined group of beneficiaries, thereby achieving an appropriate return for the resources invested. Chait, Ryan and Taylor agree that boards seek to contribute generative thought to the subject of the organization's purpose and focus.⁸ Boards work creatively and bravely to take on the challenge of defining Ends to create powerful change in the world.

Karen Fryday-Field, MBA, is the lead consultant at Meridian Edge Management and Governance Consulting in Canada. She serves organizations as they work to build governance effectiveness, focusing on strategic and generative thinking and impact. She may be contacted at kfryday-field@meridianedgeconsulting.com.

Notes

1. Chait R., Ryan, W., and Taylor, B. *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Non-Profit Boards*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2005.
2. Liedtka, J. "Linking Strategic Thinking with Strategic Planning," *Strategy and Leadership*, October 1998, 120–126.
3. Carver, M. "Ends Policies: A Review of Theory and Practice," *Board Leadership*, no. 106 (Nov.–Dec. 2009).
4. Eden, D. "Left Brain, Right Brain." Retrieved from <http://www.viewzone.com/bicam.html>
5. Ryan, M. J. "The Brain Low-down on Creative Thinking and Good Decision Making." Retrieved from <http://www.divinecaroline.com/self/self-discovery/brain-lowdown-creative-thinking-and-good-decision-making/#1xzz2EbMoQ8Qb>
6. Ibid.
7. See note 1.
8. Ibid.

Consider This ...

"Although trustees may not have professional or administrative expertise in the particular institution, theirs is not a *lay* judgment. It is a unique thing, a *trustee judgment*, and it stands on a par in importance with any other judgment within the institution."

Robert K. Greenleaf, *Trustees as Servants*, (Indianapolis, IN: Robert K. Greenleaf Center, 1991 [orig. 1970], p. 28.