

## **A Discussion of Board Involvement Dynamics**

In Sionito Board meetings its sometimes commented that the Board is not deeply involved in the Sionito projects. It is an interesting question; how does one define governance separately from involvement. I am going to discuss boards from 'level of involvement' perspective in order to do a small comparative study. Mining fro data, I will examine the concept from my experience of being on Boards. Several Board members on Sionito have also had Board experience in other organizations and I invite their response.

### **Governance as the Executive Director's Counsellor**

I remember one Board that was governing York Region's Social Council. I was a director for 2 years and a President/Chair for the last 3 years. This Council applied for government funds for any non-profit service provider in York Region with a goal of expanding the amount of government funds coming into York Region. As a consequence, it had the Mayors of all the municipalities in the Region on the Board. They didn't all show up regularly but they would send an executive and for sure they all showed up for the AGM and a once a year planning meeting, which I had to chair. Ruling a Mayor out of order was done with care.

This Board was a focused group of prominent citizens of the community, an example being the owner of five MacDonald franchises etc. Looking back on this experience the board members role was to obtain, retain and maintain a dynamic Executive Director who had the skills to fulfill the mission of the Council. As a Board member I rarely met any of her staff team of six or so executives. The skill this Board needed was someone who knew how to fill out applications, assist others to identify sources of funds and then attract the funds through advocating directly with government executives. Looking back on this experience I personally learned a great deal from her. As an aside, that is perhaps why my own skill set is focused on attracting government funders rather than donor donations. Sionito in the past and present could be well served by a person on staff with donor fund-raising abilities or a Board member willing to take responsibilities in this area.

As a board member most of our involvement was in reading reports to ensure that money that came through the Council to a service providers was being spent as per the agreement established. Some on the Council Board members were executives from large agencies such as Children's Aid and they had valuable input in terms of recent government legislated policy and government budget highlights. My social work status allowed other members to respect my input but in general we listened carefully to the Executive Director, giving corrective insights so that her application would be well accepted by the government funders. In this model, governance was governance and staff involvement was off limits. I don't think I ever attended a staff meeting during my five years on the Council, and unless I was thanking a staff for their service I would not even meet them. In this model the Executive Direct has mission control. In this model the Board is in real trouble if the director is in trouble. A Board committee chaired by a board member that had in depth experience in personnel management was designated each

year to have a personal interview with the Executive Director and report back to the Board on their assessment of this person's successes and continued vision for the Council. In this model, the Board of Directors are present to strengthen her/his abilities to be an influencer with the government funding programs. This time of year always had an eye on succession options should they be needed.

When I became President, it was common knowledge that you were owned by the Executive Director. In this case, Barbara Moorehead, could phone me at any time, day or evening, and ask for my attendance at any meeting the Council was having especially with gov't funders in attendance. I was expected to change my agenda to accommodate hers, never the reverse. If we received new funding for a service provider, I was the one shaking hands with the assembled MP and MPP politicians and giving my speech on how important these funds were for the growth of the Regions service structure. Often I didn't have a clue what our staff was doing day to day, but as the Council Chair, I walked into the assembled room, often a few minutes late, with a stern looking Executive handing me a one page list of speaking points that indicated the names of who was in attendance, where the funds were coming from, and four points on outlining where the funds would be invested. With the other hand she was pointing me to where the lectern was, as I had already been introduced! For me, who had stood many Sundays behind a lectern, it was a rewarding position to be in, and I always had lots to say... but the Executive Director and her staff, they did all the rest. I was always under the impression that she had more power to replace me than I her. Obviously, this wasn't the case but this model only works if both a high powered executive and a self-confident board chair have a very high level of respect for each other's skills. She understood her role to ensure that the funders realized that the Council was community-based with a chair who could represent the citizens of the community. I can actually still see Barbara standing at the back of the room, leading the clapping and giving me a thumbs up sign with one hand and using the other for that cross the front of the neck sign. An ambidextrous motion, indicating I had done well, but its past time to stop talking and get off the stage! I also sat on the founding board of the Vaughan Neighbourhood Support Centre, became chair and essentially, experienced the same type of governance model.

*In terms of Board governance the above represents very low involvement in the organization's day to day activities, high involvement in the organization's mission and public presence. The Executive Director and the team they choose control the day to day services. The Board on obtaining a competent executive director then works in the background to make them successful in this particular mission. It is premised on the fact that the Board members had the same competence level but did not have the time nor focus to manage this staff team; their role of governance was to provide guidance and encouragement. This is what I refer to as an executive driven, mission governed board of directors. It operates similar to a private corporation with a Board that expects strong controlling CEO's.*

### **Governance With Self-Energized Involved Volunteers**

Contrasted with this I've been on every type of committee and leadership group a church can throw at a person. They govern through committees and all are volunteers, for the most part.

The contrast to the above professionally staffed governance is that the church committees whether branch level or Regional level are all very involved in the activities of the church. In these governance meetings whether you are attending or chairing you leave feeling that people had volunteered and that the Christmas service would happen; the bulletin, the music, the pageant, the speakers, the lunch after, the clean up... it was now planned. The chair, really just kept the meeting going making sure from experience that each item got planned and was assigned to the appropriate fellow volunteer. This is a community building, community-based Board, often in churches referred to as the leadership team. It's very rewarding, as it is very action focused. You feel part of the action.

*The above represents a governance with very high involvement in the organization's day to day activities, with no or few staff. This is a community building governance structure.*

### **Governance of Fund-Raising Boards**

Essentially, I've never been on a fund-raising board where the Board members themselves are expected to be fund-raisers. However, I've been in governing positions in organizations that are dependent on fund-raising, but who hired the staff for that function. I chaired World Accord for several years and watched in amazement as its founder Terry Fielder every year increased the donations of his donor base, only to start over, ready to do the same thing over again the next year. I think that's when I decided to stay with real estate based social services which once established raise their own funds through rental revenues. In more recent Boards at World Accord they have generated fund-raising galas and with input from people like Chad Dailey and his business contacts they have entered into this area of Board involvement with success.

In the private world, fund raising committees are amazing in their abilities. They operate as a Short Term Board much along the same principles that some organizations depending on donors require. The private school my wife and I operated for 30 years had these communities. The chair of the committee did not allow the school staff or owners to be involved. It ran completely arms length, with the goal that they were representing the parent's interest in the success of the school. This model is based totally on member's of an organization having status in the community. Translated this means if your family isn't crazy wealthy, you're not on their radar screen, nor on the committee. As a co-owner, watching items auctioned off, I would simply stand back and marvel at what was available. Everything from NHL hockey seats, concert tickets, and a slew of handy around the home items. And of course, the sale of tickets to the event; not one on one, but you were expected to buy a table. They would obligingly offer a free table for us lowly staff and owners, recognizing we had neither salary level nor wealth to pay for a table at the costs they were contemplating. Obviously, on this type of Board you are expected to have contacts with people who owe you one; you've attended their event for their kid, so now they have to come and attend at your table! I think several business deals were consummated at the gala each year.

*The above represents a very low involvement in the organization's day to day activities, but with a high involvement in the organization's revenue generation. It requires individuals in the community who not only know other individuals but who can attract them to donate.*

### **Summary:**

There is a continuum that ranges from governors with normal skills but who are **highly involved** with day to day operations of the organization through to governors with independent skills who are **not involved** in the day to day operations of the organization, in fact they are discouraged from doing so.

### **The Sionito Board Commentary**

From the opening statements, let us review where the Sionito Board is placed in terms of this continuum of involvement.

I would suggest that Sionito is characterized by Governance with a high functioning staff but with some Board members coming to the Board from a highly involved, highly energized volunteer-based governance model. This is a result of the Board over the years attracting members from its original church sponsor, the Community of Christ. The result is it just doesn't "feel" right to not be more involved in the staff or management decisions. As an aside, in the reverse, this is why being a full-time employee in a church setting is so difficult. Many of us in the zoom window or around the table have been employees of the church which is wonderful in some respects. In other respects you're simply considered the head volunteer! You do not have the autonomy, the skills based respect nor the authority that a CEO requires in order to establish their agenda or strategic plan for the group.

So the Board discussion, is which model do we want to follow or is there a hybrid model or should we focus on all three models at the same time using committees.

### **Discussion Points**

#### 1) Moving Towards the Highly Involved Board

Sionito is a housing provider as well as a program life-ability provider. It provides opportunities for deep involvement in day to day activities of the charity.

a) In terms of the housing provision, the Board in the past and could at any time decide they should do the painting, cutting the grass etc., etc. etc. at any of the housing projects. If it were a church building this would be the normal way of being involved.

b) In terms of program provision the Board could provide, whether they are church ministers or not, ministry to the residents by getting to know them, planning church type gatherings with them and what is so badly needed visit them in the downtown Toronto hospitals when they are sent there. They go on their own and they often die on their own in a foreign setting. It's actually a sad situation and at some point we need to find the volunteer board member or pay a part time chaplain to fulfill this needed gap in our services.

#### 2) Moving Towards a Fund-raising Board

Sionito has committed to raising at least \$2-500,000 from the community for the Finch Avenue project over the next 2 years. Some of the community-based boards that I deal with are very effective in this regards. One has Justin Trudeau's mother as an honorary board member, that's hard to trump. And she can really give a moving trunk speech. The Board could become very

involved in fund raising from donors as it has members on the Board who have worked with church friendly foundations in the past, with some success. In the past Ian Rowett was quite effective in raising donations from members of the sponsoring church. I personally have had success in raising funds from foundations. Sionito is doing really exciting things that perhaps could attract the attention of donors, foundations and others. We do have Board members who have raised significant funds from donors and from foundations so this is certainly an option.

### 3) Moving Towards Being the Out-Front Spokespersons

Sionito has Board members who can speak very well, write extremely well and one of them can even sing well! Our web page has finally reached a level that it does project an image of who we are and that has been very important in the work of raising government funds. The Board in this regard could become a spokes group for seniors who have no one speaking for them.

Proportionately, more seniors died during the COVID pandemic in Canada than anywhere else in the world. Some bad decisions were made. The caveat is that charities are not to be vehicles for any political cause so this has to be done with some skill. However, I feel this to be an increasing bipartisan issue of how to maintain civility in an aging society. So I will write my book... soon I hope.

So those are my thoughts from as Joni Mitchell sings, I've looked at life from both sides now... I think Sionito could gain strength from further discussion on these matters as we move forward more aggressively to take advantage of the government focus on all forms of affordable housing.

Bryce A. Taylor <sup>MSW RSW</sup>

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