

Tom Little's
BIG IDEAS
for Non-Profits

In This Edition

September 28 to October 2, 2020

**Boards of Directors Are Organizational Stewards
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Three of our articles focus on non-profit Boards of Directors. We discuss role of a Board, acknowledge the contribution of volunteer Board members and hearken back to a Board training event we conducted in 2015.

We also return to the theme of Wikipedia and its importance as a non-profit when so many Internet sites are about monetization, often at the expense of the user.

Boards of Directors Are Organizational Stewards

The Story

Non-profit Boards of Directors are stewards. They are the people given the responsibility to protect and foster the organization and its work.

This fundamental premise has come under scrutiny in the case of WE Charity Foundation and the Kielburger brothers. The brothers appear to have pulled off what some might consider an end run around this principle, by assigning extraordinary voting rights to one class of member, called Founding members. In so doing, the stewardship role of the Board has been compromised.

In spite of WE Charity Foundation, it seems fair to say that the principle remains intact, and 99.9% of non-profit Boards can pursue the role of organizational steward unencumbered.

The Skinny

If non-profit Boards are stewards, the question becomes “how do they exercise that stewardship”?

They do so in three ways: through leadership, oversight and managing itself.

Spoiler alert: I don’t want you to think I was smart enough to think up this particular characterization. I first found the descriptor in work published by Dalhousie University. But I am okay if you think me smart for realizing how helpful this descriptor is, and for passing it on to you, especially since, in true social service fashion, we can shorten this up by using the acronym LOMi.

Leadership

Looking at each of those in turn, leadership involves a number of tasks: Addressing the organization’s legal structure, having a compelling vision and mission, planning the work of the organization, ensuring it is financial stable, and dealing with major problems, such as COVID-19, as they arise. Boards also exercise leadership by profiling and promoting the organization and its cause and by undertaking special projects such as capital expansion.

Oversight

In small non-profits, Boards do everything. But larger ones hire staff and delegate day-to-day operations to an Executive Director or a Chief Executive Officer. For those larger ones, the Board then is required to exercise oversight of the work of that person.

As my colleague Nancy Collins likes to observe, this should be the easiest part of the Board role. It can be fulfilled by requiring that the ED/CEO have a plan, executes the plan and documents the results. The results become the centre point for the evaluation of ED/CEO performance.

Managing Itself

The third area of responsibility for the Board is managing itself, which is manifested through effective recruiting of members, well-organized meetings, good decision-making, a solid structure of Officers and committees, and policies related to governance that add to the organization's bylaw and provide a how-to for the operation of the Board.

The BIG Idea

My BIG Idea for this week for you to memorize Dalhousie's description of the role of the Board: Leadership, Oversight and Managing Itself. This can become a great conversations starter. When someone asks you what you do, you can say: "I'm a Board member of a non-profit". And when a quizzical expression crosses their face, you can add: "...which involves leadership, oversight and managing ourselves". Even if such an elaboration doesn't totally neutralize the quizzical expression, it should greatly enhance your stature in that person's eyes.

Emails... We Get Emails

One of the 2%

Included in my email in-box last week was an appeal for funds from Wikipedia.

I have written often about Wikipedia and its mission to provide all the world's knowledge for free to every citizen in every language.

Even if it falls a bit short on occasion, either in quality or quantity of content, I continue to admire the audacity of its aspiration. It's a bit of "Jimmy Wales envy", really, Jimmy being the founder of Wikipedia. "Why couldn't I have been Jimmy", I ask myself.

Once again, because I am one of the 2% of users who donates to Wikipedia, the ask has arrived. Like last year, Executive Director Katherine Maher makes her pitch:

"We're a non-profit. That means we aren't selling the articles that millions of people read on Wikipedia each day. We don't profit from the knowledge you seek. In fact, we firmly believe that knowledge should exist outside of the realm of supply and demand. But that's hardly a given nowadays; so much of the world's digital knowledge is driven by profit in order to survive."



This gives me some comfort in a world where everything related to the Internet seems to be about monetizing, even if it's at the expense of people's privacy and of government tax revenues that are badly needed. So, Wikipedia can continue to count on my donation, as small as it is.

Although I must admit, that in this very unusual year, where COVID has disrupted the financing of so many non-profits, I do wonder if my money should be going somewhere else that is equally worthy.

This Week's TomBit

A Standing O for All Board Members

This week's lead article, about Board stewardship, and the Blast from the Past article below about Mishmash Boards and Time Vampires, are reminders of the huge contribution volunteer Board members make to non-profits and charities and the communities they serve.



That contribution comes at a cost of time and effort, which was on full display this past Saturday when my colleague Nancy Collins and I provided Board training for Community Living Trent Highlands.

We spent three hours with the CLTH Board covering the landscape of issues impacting on the work of non-profit Boards. This required advance preparation on the part of Board members, including reading my book for Boards, and contributing to three hours of discussion, either in person or virtually.

Notable was the fact that not one of the participants complained they were missing out on a beautiful September day.

Volunteer Board members, at CLTH and everywhere: Stand up and take a bow. We salute you!

Blast from the Past

Blast from the Past is a selection of previous BIG Ideas articles that you may not have read, or if you did, may have forgotten how helpful and insightful (i.e. brilliantly written) they were. This article is from 2015.



Board Training Uncovers a Mishmash Board and Time Vampires

The basic idea of my Board training is that I bring knowledge of non-profit Boards and how they should operate, and that the people attending will benefit when I share that information.

Which is correct...at least as far as it goes.

But there is another dynamic at work when people get together for my Board training: They share their own experiences. This makes the process richer and more useful.

So it was on Saturday, when I spent the day in Haliburton with Board members from a number of organizations, at a training session sponsored by Community Living Haliburton County. Other participants included FoodNet Network, Haliburton Highlands Nordic Trails Association, Canoe FM Radio Station, Friends of the Haliburton County Public Library and Minden and Haliburton Food Banks.

The day got off on the right foot when we discussed Board models. I explained that Boards of Directors could adopt a model that would give focus to the work of the Board. Popular models include Policy Boards, Policy Governance or Carver Boards, Administrative/Management/Operating Boards (Working Boards) and Planning Boards.

Then one participant started talking about her organization. It had been through a lot in the last few years. The Board had completed a review of everything the organization did. While the Directors felt they were definitely coming out the other side, they recognized that a lot remained to be done. And until those actions were completed, the Board would be doing a bit of this and a bit of that. So it was that she thought they were a **Mishmash Board**. Mishmash...we all wrote that down.

Another topic was Board meetings and how to make them as effective as possible, without consuming an inordinate amount of everyone's time. One participant identified the bogeyman of all Board meetings...the **Time Vampire**. This is the person who takes a short, straightforward discussion and turns it into a lengthy exploration of tangential issues and ideas.

The group agreed there were several solutions that could be applied to drive a stake into the heart of a Time Vampire. You could use of Roberts Rules of Order, either from the large softcover edition or a "Googled" summary version (one participant had brought a copy of the latter), or you could introduce a "consent agenda" where topics not requiring the action of the Board can be bypassed without comment. However, the group awarded the best solution to the participant who explained that her

Board's best friend was a large wooden gavel ...the exact application of which was left to the imagination and discretion of the person wielding it.

The existence and role of Executive Committees was a topic of interest. One person noted her Board has one that is responsible for dealing with emergency situations, especially those involving confidentiality, when the whole Board cannot be convened. She felt the Committee exercised its power prudently and was an asset to the organization. After discussion the group agreed that it is important to define the duties and authority of Executive Committees, and in particular whether they are able to make decisions that bind the corporation.

We also talked about learning styles. At least one attendee said she was a **Lazy Learner** and needed to approach educational situations in a certain way if she was to benefit from them. The format we used must have worked for her, because at the end of our time together she provided a lengthy list of the things she had noted that would be helpful in being a better Board member.

Since Canoe FM is a non-profit, we took a bit of time to explore some of the differences between non-profits and charities. I noted that Board members of non-profits could be paid for their work, unlike Board members of charities, and referred to the Board Chair of Ornge, the Ontario air ambulance service that was so much in the news a few years ago. That person was reported to have been paid \$250,000 per year. Apparently Canoe FM isn't quite there yet, but one Canoe Board member was pretty sure the pen he was holding was provided free gratis by the radio station. He just didn't think it was worth \$250,000.

Other ideas the group liked included:

- Develop a yearly work plan for the Board and having it on every meeting agenda for discussion and updating
- Ensure declaration of conflict of interest is also an agenda item at every meeting
- If you are looking for new Board members, consider recruiting people who run for political office but aren't successful. They will have a community orientation and time on their hands and could be the ideal person to approach.

Saturday's participants also observed that Haliburton, the town and the county, was very community orientated and very supportive of the local charities and non-profits. One Board member noted he had lived in a neighbouring part of Ontario for many years, but that other community did not demonstrate nearly the public support he found when he moved to Haliburton.

As you might surmise, these were all good people sitting around the table, giving up a beautiful Saturday in May so they could learn how to do their volunteer jobs better. And concepts like Mishmash Boards, Time Vampires and Lazy Learners mean their own experience is important and helpful when shared.

So, my BIG Idea for this week is to take your knowledge with you when you participate in training and share it with your colleagues. It will make the experience better for yourself and for others.

Current CMCS Clients

We are pleased to be working with Community Living Thunder Bay, Haliburton Housing, Tri-County Community Support Services, Literacy Network Northeast, Community Living Port Colborne-Wainfleet, Community Visions and Networking (Quinte), Chatham-Kent Family Health Team, Community Living Trent Highlands and Mill Creek Care Centre (Barrie).

Testimonials

Thank you again to you and Nancy for all the work, dedication and effort put into this Operations Review. We made the right choice in hiring you to do this project and on behalf of the board of directors, I express our deep gratitude.

Roz Werner-Arce, Board Chair, Durham Youth Services

Our Strategic Plan is moving along better than I could have imagined. I chair the group of around 20 Board and staff who have been meeting monthly for the past 6 months and plan to continue through the fall. Great enthusiasm from all involved and much is being accomplished already, particularly on renewed focus on our Mission and Vision. Thanks again for getting us off on the right foot!

Frank Moore, Board Chair, Community Living Central Huron

About Tom Little and Nancy Collins

Tom Little and Nancy Collins are the principals of CMCS.



Tom has been Executive Director of a large human service organization. In his mind this makes him something of an expert. Humour him – he's been known to adjust his fees for people who think he is just so profound.

Nancy's background includes a degree from Wilfrid Laurier and working at a downtown Toronto law firm. In her spare time, she plays goal in women's hockey and catcher in summer slo-pitch. A life-long Leafs fan, she no longer apologizes for her unwavering commitment, given their resurrection in recent years. Now if they could just win a playoff round!



Free Resources From CMCS

We offer a range of free resources to help non-profits be better. For your copy, contact us at info@cmcsconsulting.ca.

Board Duties
Policy Board Model
Board Meeting Minutes
Board Decision-Making Checklist
Board Evaluation Form
Dealing with Risk
List of Possible Board Policies
Board Recruitment (Stop the BIG LIE)
Management Principles
Member and Director Qualifications
The Importance of Planning
Canada's Great Non-Profit Websites

Tom's Book For Boards of Directors



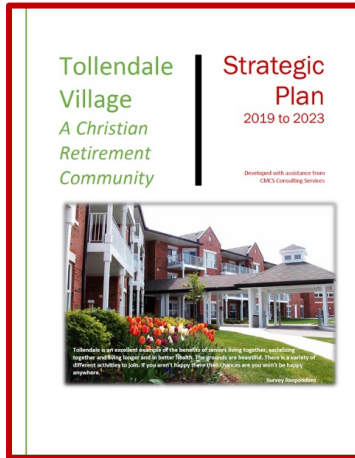
One hundred and ninety-pages. Thirty-six *BIG Ideas*. Thirteen of them are *The BIGGEST of the BIG*, ideas Tom's experience says are critical to any non-profit. Then come twenty-three *BIG Ideas*, more ways to enhance the governance of your organization.

You don't just get ideas either. The book contains all kinds of resources for implementing them. For example, *BIG Ideas* includes samples of strategic and Board yearly action plans, and of evaluation formats Boards can use to rate their own work.

Tom Little's BIG Ideas is formatted as a work book, so it can be used on a continuous basis by the Directors. It is easy to read and has a fun quality your Board members will appreciate.

Just \$40 plus HST and shipping. For your copy, contact us at info@cmcsconsulting.ca.

More About CMCS



At CMCS, our specialty is strategic planning. Since the start of 2018, the following 13 organizations have completed their strategic plans with help from CMCS:

Kenora Association for Community Living
Community Living Dryden-Sioux Lookout
Community Living Trent Highlands
Elmira District Community Living
Literacy Northwest
Durham Region Child Care Forum
Tollendale Village
Centennial College School of Transportation
York Region Violence Against Women Coordinating Committee
Autism Home Base Durham
Canoe FM Community Radio

Toronto Island Residential Community Trust
York Region Centre for Community Safety

We provide Board training that comes with a bonus: A Board action plan developed by participants based on the discussion.

Tom wrote his book for non-profit Boards, which you can buy and use as an ongoing resource. We are great facilitators and can help develop agendas for Board and management retreats.

Much of our past work has been in the human service sector, especially disability. But we have assisted in other sectors such as community colleges, local workforce authorities, family health teams, Big Brothers Big Sisters, United Ways and violence against women.

We have built our reputation on producing quality products that have great content and are appealing to look at.