

Tom Little's **BIG IDEAS**

for Non-Profits

In This Edition

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Our lead article is about small non-profits that pack a big punch. This week's email is from a respondent to our survey about Boards of Directors having the backs of their Executive Directors, who doesn't buy into the concept 100%. The TomBit is a personal musing about a magical Thanksgiving. Blast from the Past speaks to the very topical issue of working from home.

Finally, a quick reminder that at CMCS we are operating as before, just remotely. This week, for example, we are providing Board training via Zoom. If you want to do planning, get training or hold a retreat, we can help.

Small Can Be Beautiful

The Story

Some children go to school without being fed breakfast or having a lunch.

It took me a while to come to terms with that fact. My colleague Nancy Collins and I were working with a community health centre when it first came to my attention, and my initial response was something like: “Are you kidding me?” And then: “Where are the parents?”

Subsequently, we encountered other organizations that also served children and that provided food and after-school programs. And I gradually accepted that this was reality for some and blaming the parents and expecting them to step up wasn’t going to help. For the sake of the children, we needed community mobilization to address it.

I was reminded of this recently when preparing a planning proposal for a small charity that provides lunches for schoolchildren. It began as a church outreach program and had aspirations to expand its reach, hence the need for a plan.

This in turn got me thinking about similar small outreach services and how important they are to the fabric of our communities. This includes organizations we have worked with, like FOOTPRINTS 4 Autism, started by a church in Pickering and now helping families in both Pickering and Whitby. And the 4Cs foodbank and thrift store in Haliburton, the four “C’s” symbolizing the four churches that sponsor it. And Feed the Need in Durham, the hub for obtaining and distributing food to families across Durham Region. Feed the Need distributes 1.44 million pounds of food each year, equivalent to 1.2 million meals.

These organizations operate on a shoestring budget and depend on volunteer contributions for all or much of their work. If they didn’t exist, the lives of people in their communities, children but also adults, would be even more challenging.

Small can evolve into big, although that is not why these organizations exist and that is not necessarily their aspiration. I don’t know how the Toronto Foundation for Student Success, another organization we have worked with, began its life. I am guessing it was a teacher who couldn’t bear to see students go hungry. But TFSS now supports approximately 810 breakfast, lunch and snack programs in Toronto schools that provide almost 213,000 meals daily (yes, daily); offers vision and hearing checks and optometry clinics for almost 16,000 students in 150 of the neediest schools; sponsors after-school programs for over 1,200 middle school kids in high-risk areas; and has created an emergency fund for students with urgent needs and addresses student health with its Model Schools Paediatric Health Initiative.

The Skinny

Out of a need comes a charity. This happens over and over and over again. Some succeed, some don't. Some get big. Some remain small. Most depend on volunteers and are funded through donations. All make our communities better.

The Big Idea

Canada's charity world is dominated by the biggies: hospitals and universities in particular. So, it is easy to forget the wee ones, those that operate on a shoestring and are very local in scale. My BIG Idea is to celebrate and support the wee ones, especially in our current circumstances, where every bit of help matters.

Emails... We Get Emails

Guide the Ship: Ask Questions, Be Informed and Make Good Decisions

Last week I referenced the Executive Director whose compliment to their Board of Directors went something like this: "Thanks for having my back while staying off my back." I then suggested Boards should adopt this as their mantra, although I didn't make it totally unconditional.



The following response to that article admonishes Boards of Directors to ensure their support of their CEO/ED is contingent on asking questions, being informed and making "the best decisions on behalf of the people who are served by that agency, by that staff and by those dollars". It further cautions that: "Boards should not be encouraged to have, unconditionally, the back of an ED nor to stay off it."

Hypothetically speaking, an ED who is dishonest, badly behaved, or disrespectful, an ED whose focus is personal ego and pocket book, these would be situations a board may infrequently have to deal with.

When an individual ceases to have the agency's best interests at the fore and instead is led by greed and overvalued self-worth, the accomplishments of an agency become overvalued and are out of sync with the individual's expected level of recompense and recognition.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, it is an easy task for boards to have the back and stay off the back of a hardworking, forthright ED.

When an ED is respectful and communicative, this facilitates the work of a board. When an ED attends meetings with a mind open to input from others, this promotes collaboration and preserves democratic processes associated with not for profit governance.

More pointedly, boards should speak up, ask questions; there is always more under a story when boards begin peeling away the layers. Boards are not entitled to steer the ship however they can certainly guide it.

If boards are on an ED's back, there is often a reason. It is a flaw in the not-for-profit model that there is so little oversight or supervision of EDs. Boards should not be encouraged to have, unconditionally, the back of an ED nor to stay off it, rather to be informed and make the best decisions on behalf of the people who are served by that agency, by that staff and by those dollars.

This Week's TomBit

Of Thanksgiving, a Lunch Bag and Magic

We had attended the classes. I was equipped with a stopwatch to time the contractions. There was a bag for my wife with changes of clothes and other necessities, and a lunch for me, packed and ready. When my wife's water broke, that Sunday evening in October, just hours before Thanksgiving Monday, we were ready.



Or so we thought.

Our confidence was challenged soon after our 7 a.m. arrival at the hospital. A routine test showed something had changed.

Exit our GP and enter Doctor Henderson, Obstetrician.

No scrubs for this doc. Suitably attired in brown tweed jacket and tie, he was all calm and reassurance. The baby had turned, sometime after the last checkup. It was now sideways and sideways meant being far from the only exit. There was nothing to be concerned about, but the recommended course of action was a Caesarian Section.

(In truth, the whole switch from our GP to an OB was a little disconcerting. We knew the GP. We had confidence in the GP. Now there was this new person to deal with. In an aside, I asked the GP, "Are you sure this guy has a licence?" The reply was: "I am almost positive" or words to that effect.)

Not wanting all those classes, the stopwatch and my lunch, to go waste, we pleaded our case for a "natural" birth. Never abandoning his well-practiced demeanor, the doctor agreed we could try, while being clear that, in the circumstances, nature was unlikely to take its course. There were also limits, he cautioned. The little one couldn't stay in its cocoon past evening. The rule was clear: it had to come out

within twenty-four hours of the water breaking, to avoid infection. While he waited, because it was a holiday, Doctor H would go home to his family.

My wife was injected with medication to start the contractions. Soon it did just that, and my trusty stopwatch was put to use timing them. "Two minutes", I reported. This continued for some time. "Two minutes", I would say. "Still two minutes?" my wife would ask. "Still two minutes", I would respond.

I can't say quite how long that went on, but I know when it stopped. That was exactly when one of the nurses walked in, saw the stopwatch, and casually remarked: "When you are induced, contractions are always two minutes apart." A tad embarrassed and wishing the classes had covered this eventuality, I quietly slipped the stopwatch under my jacket and reached into my lunch bag for a bit of consolation.

Morning begat afternoon and afternoon was moving towards a beautiful October sunset, when the good Doctor returned, still tweedy and looking well satisfied with the Thanksgiving dinner he had enjoyed with his family, perhaps grateful for our decision to try.

But no more pretending there might be a natural birth. Now, there was work to do.

Off went my wife on the gurney. Because this was considered an emergency C-Section, she would be given a general anesthetic. I would be alone with my lunch bag in the waiting room - no dads were allowed in the operating room during that particular medical era.

Not twenty minutes later, quick because the general anesthetic meant the doc could make the bikini cut right away, just big enough to slide the head and body out, no need to wait for a local injection to take, and before I could really dig into my snacks, down the hall came a nurse pushing a trolley. On that trolley was an incubator, and under the incubator's clear plastic dome, something pink was staring out, eyes wide open, already amazed at the world she was seeing.

"You have a healthy, beautiful daughter. Eight pounds, three ounces. Congratulations."

If I told you I could describe that moment, I would be lying. No pre-natal class, no discussion with a GP or an obstetrician, no timing of contractions, no lunch bag of any size, can prepare you for the magic of seeing your child for the first time.

It is burned in my memory.

Thanksgiving is about being grateful for a bountiful harvest. On that holiday Monday, I was doubly blessed.

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 and is especially topical in the age of COVID.



Employees Working from Home - Both Employees and Managers Need Different Skills

Most organizations have at least some employees who work from home. A few corporations give most of their staff licence to do so. But did you know that allowing employees to work from home changes the employment paradigm for both workers and managers?

Staff who do well in an office environment don't necessarily do well when they work remotely. The same applies to the people who manage them. So, if you are thinking about moving in this direction, you need to assess the skills of both the employee and manager, to ensure they have the right stuff to thrive in this different environment. So explains Kirsten Sundin in "Virtual Teams: Work/Life Challenges-Keeping Remote Employees Engaged", a summary of research on this topic.

It goes without saying that a remote employee must be able to work independently so, s/he needs to be good at setting goals, planning and executing. The profile of a good remote employee also includes:

- A strong balance of technical knowledge and social skills
- Adaptable, well organized and flexible
- Resilient, extroverted and self-confident
- Open to new experiences and opportunities to socialize

On the other hand, to effectively direct and support the remote worker, managers must first and foremost be strong communicators. The greatest danger of working remotely is isolation and disengagement, so effective managers keep those employees informed and involved. "Short but frequent contacts are needed to keep remote employees abreast of daily happenings - effectively replacing the small interactions that would traditionally happen in the hallway or the lunch room....Distant leaders become responsible for communicating the company culture..."

It goes without saying that someone managing a remote worker needs to be available to that person most if not all the time. Other demands on the manager of remote staff include building trust by keeping commitments and being clear on how performance will be measured and evaluated.

The relationship among remote workers is also important, and a manager needs to be attentive to opportunities that allow them to work together. This can be accomplished by engaging them in projects and through professional development, as well as periodic in-person staff meetings. The same applies to connecting remote workers with those who come to the office each day.

The payoffs of a remote worker approach to both the worker and the employer are considerable. The worker eliminates commute time and cost. S/he gets to enjoy increased flexibility. Work-life balance improves. The employer saves money on work space; enjoys reduced absenteeism, turnover and burnout; and has an additional major selling feature when recruiting staff.

But potholes exist too. If not everyone on staff works from home, there can be tension between those who do and those who don't. Inculcating remote workers with the organizational culture can be challenging. And if do's and don'ts aren't clearly laid out, a remote worker might think it's perfectly okay to play hockey during the day and do work in the evening, even while her/his manager is calling, emailing or texting and muttering "where the #@&*is that \$#%@&\$ anyway?"

So, my BIG Idea for this week is that working remotely may be right for some or most people in your organization, but moving in that direction requires forethought and planning. Some of the skills needed to work and manage remotely are different than those that pertain when everyone congregates in one location. Proceed thoughtfully and keep an eye on the research. This looks like the way of the future, so best practices should continue to emerge.

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.

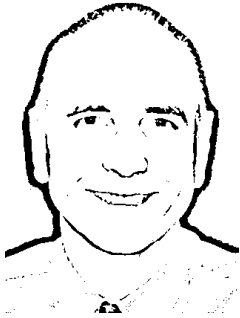
Roz Werner-Arce, Board Chair, Durham Youth Services

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
- Transitioning to the New Not-for-Profit Corporations Act

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 14 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
 Literacy Network Northeast

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.