

**Tom Little's**

# **BIG IDEAS**

**for Non-Profits**

## **In This Edition**

February 1-5, 2021

### **Stardust, We Are Stardust**

*Tom's COVID pastime, watching videos on astrophysics, helps him uncover an idea that can be applied by all non-profits.*

### **Boards Need Plans Too**

*Most non-profits plan their operations, but not all plan the work of their Board of Directors. Tom explains why Boards should plan too.*

### **Fika is a Moveable Feast**

*This week's Blast from the Past offers something every CEO/ED can bring to their organization, from Christine Vallis-Page of E3 Community Services.*

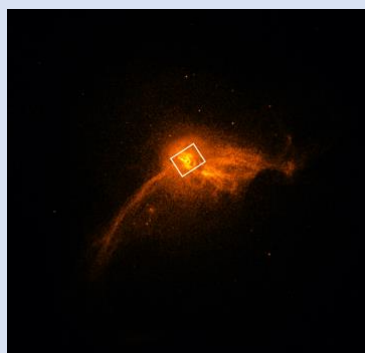
# Headline News

## *Stardust, We Are Stardust*

### The Story

Watching live YouTube webcam feeds of trains travelling across North America: that's how one of our BIG Ideas reader is surviving the pandemic. Alberta, B.C., California, Virginia, Nebraska, Texas – wherever there's a track, apparently there's a camera. He admits that viewing the clickety-clack of freight and passenger trains can sometimes consume a tad more time than he would like.

For me, COVID-time also means watching YouTube, but in my case it is lectures and videos on the physics of the Universe: how it was formed, how it has grown and changed, and where exactly Earth and our solar system fit in that much bigger picture.



The Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics in Waterloo, funded by BlackBerry money (yes, there was a time when BlackBerry had money), videotapes its public lectures and makes them available for free (with none of those annoying YouTube commercials that can turn up every three minutes, I might add).

In an hour, you can learn about Nobel Prize-worthy initiatives, like how, for example, in 2017, a team of astronomers from around the world, including Perimeter, was able to capture an image of a black hole for the first time. Black holes, even this one which is 6.5 billion times larger than the mass of our sun, are compacted by intense gravity so they take up a tiny, tiny, tiny, tiny amount of physical space. As such, they were, until 2017, impossible to image. But this international collaboration accomplished that feat.



The problem with astrophysics is that everything is scaled-up. Earth seems big to us but our fifth planet, Jupiter, is 300 times bigger. Our Sun seems big but there are stars 100 times more massive. Our Milky Way galaxy seems big but Hercules A is 15 times larger. Our species seems old at two million years, but the Universe goes back 13.8 billion years.

So, let's forget scale and consider a fact we can get hold of: all the elements that we humans are made of originated not on Earth, but in the explosions of stars. These explosions created clouds of gas and dust, which eventually coalesced into the Sun and the planets. Until recently, if I thought about it at all, which I didn't very often, I was of the opinion that everything needed for life was already here on Earth, and life just emerged and evolved from what was available. Apparently not.

In a 1990s movie called *Before Sunrise*, the young couple at the centre of the story (played by the USA's Ethan Hawke and France's Julie Delpy, are sitting in an outdoor café, when they are approached by a Roma palm reader. After reading their palms and accepting their money, she turns back and offers a parting remark: *"You are both stars. Billions of years ago, when the stars exploded, they created everything we know today. So remember... stardust ... you are stardust."* She then laughs and walks away.



Now we have it: we are stardust!

Yet, the more we know, including that we are stardust, the more we don't know. Scientists tell us that detectable matter and energy make up only 4% of the Universe. The rest is what they call Dark Matter, at around 27%, and Dark Energy at around 69%.

This is rather confounding.

How is it that all our efforts to date have brought us to the point where we can only explain 4% of what's out there? Are we expected to accept that 96% is "dark"? Clearly, astrophysics has a ways to go. (BTW, BIG Ideas has checked and can confirm that all you readers are included in the 4% of matter that can be explained. Yes, I know....Whew!)

## **The Skinny**

If scientists eventually figure out this dark stuff, the secret to their success will be teamwork. In all the astronomy lectures I have watched on YouTube, including imaging a black hole for the first time, when a significant advance has been made, it's a team that did it. A picture of the team will be put up on the screen and there will be so many faces, you can't determine the total number. All you know is that there were a lot.

## **The BIG Idea**

This is not rocket science (wait... actually it is), but my BIG Idea for this week is to focus on teamwork. All you want to accomplish will be easier when you mobilize everyone to the cause. Ensure that, like astrophysicists, teamwork is a cornerstone principle for your organization. Oh, yes, and periodically take a picture of your group, as a reminder that you are all in this together. Remember, you are looking at stardust.

## This Week's TomBit



### Boards of Directors Need Plans Too

Almost all Boards of Directors want their CEOs and Executive Directors to plan the day-to-day operation of their non-profit organizations. But some Boards do not have the same expectation of themselves.

This seems curious because the benefits of planning are apparent to everyone. It's just that for some reason, the principle doesn't always get evenly applied.

It may be true that a Board can get along without a plan, but a Board will find it works better with one. That plan should be a year in length and should cover the three functions of a Board: leadership, oversight and managing itself. It also shouldn't be too long or too ambitious. Since Boards only have a certain amount of time to volunteer, its actions must be do-able within its short timeframe. Preferably it should be tied to the strategic plan.

This is all part of a larger issue related to having a culture of planning. One of the questions we ask prospective clients, is whether a culture of planning exists in the organization. If it does, we know the next plan is likely to be implemented. If it doesn't, we know that, of necessity, a key action will be developing the capacity to both create and implement plans.

One more caution: not everyone is inclined to want to work from a plan. Prepare for the possibility you will have to "encourage" some people to come to the party.

# 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 2017.*



## Fika is a Moveable Feast

### The Story

Here's a tip on how to make your organization better, courtesy of Executive Director Christine Vallis-Page of E3 Community Services in Collingwood.

It's called "fika" and it comes from Sweden. A fika is a break, and in the Swedish workplace it occurs twice daily. This means there is a förmiddagsfika and eftermiddagsfika, or before-mid-day fika and after-mid-day fika for those of you who don't speak Swedish as well as I do. The format is much as you would expect of a break organized here in Ontario, with coffee and tea and snacks, but the heart of fika is promoting and facilitating collegial conversation among work colleagues.

There are many things that make fika unique as practiced by the Swedes, according to an article by Hannah Mansson on the Virgin.com website:

- The mood is relaxed
- Everyone participates, even the big bosses
- It lasts only 20 minutes
- It starts on time and finishes on time

Mansson goes on to note that the benefits of fika are well understood in Sweden. First, research has shown that most creative work ideas result from discussion at fika, rather than at meetings convened for the purpose of coming up with something new. Beyond that, it contributes significantly to the wellbeing of the employees: "...short, consistent 'recovery' periods drastically decrease the risk of staff burning out. Not only do such breaks lead to increased overall happiness, but they save employers from paying costly sick leave in the long term." Moreover, fika enhances productivity and increases employee satisfaction.

Apparently fika leads to idea generation because those attending come from various departments, bringing different perspectives, and because the “relaxed setting means staff are more open to brainstorming and less intimidated about suggesting new ideas”. This takes us back to the core issue of communication, which we have been examining in BIG Ideas over the past weeks. At fika, people are talking to each other and getting to know each other better, including who they are and what they do outside of work. This produces new relationships, a better work environment and better outcomes.

By way of context, it’s important to know that the work culture is different in Sweden than here in Ontario and contributes to fika’s success. As explained on the webpage “Taking Care of Business In Sweden” found on the Sweden.se website:

- The work environment is casual, with everyone on a first name basis
- Work attire is conservative but casual
- “Lagom” is the operative word when it comes to work quality and quantity. Lagom means “just right” or “adequate”, and “not doing unnecessary things”. Apparently “This concept can be frustrating for foreigners to understand sometimes”.
- Organizations are flat, so “a managing director is more openly available to his or her employees, erasing some of the chain-of-command arrangements that exist in other countries. In general, it’s possible for employees to take their comments, questions or concerns directly to the boss.”
- “Equality in the workplace and job security are of utmost importance.”
- “Swedish workers tend to rely heavily on compromise and consensus when it comes to making decisions and reaching solutions. It’s generally felt to be much better if policies and ideas are discussed openly and across all levels before any conclusion is reached.”
- “Punctuality is very important for Swedes, especially when it comes to business”, in part because “Many Swedes place very high value on their private lives and therefore work overtime only when it’s absolutely unavoidable.”

## **The Skinny**

The question you may be asking is how fika can be applied among non-profits in Ontario. While the local workplace culture may differ from Sweden in some regards, it still seems reasonable to conclude you could institute fika as a morning and afternoon event and see if you can get buy-in. You might need to be patient, because it would probably take some time for people to give up their old habits of not taking breaks, of huddling in the cold to grab a quick smoke or of being reluctant to speak up when in the presence of management. But if the payoffs are as advertised, it would be worth it.

You could also use fika in a “town hall” kind-of-way by organizing informal meetings involving the Executive Director and senior management and anyone from the front ranks who wants to come. The major outcomes of any such event are connecting on a more personal level and sharing information that otherwise would not move back and forth.

## **The BIG Idea**

If fika can deliver all the benefits it’s purported to offer, then it’s time to get on board. Who wouldn’t want better generation of innovative ideas, better productivity, better morale and less time off, simply because they stopped for java and croissants? I would be right there elbowing my way to the front of the line.



So my BIG idea is to introduce fika to the people working within your organization. Institute it as an ongoing, regular part of the daily workplace culture or as something that happens periodically, town hall style. Schedule it during the day or evening. But use it as a way to share information, enhance staff engagement and morale, and increase productivity. To make it authentic, take a pass on Tim's and serve up some toscakaka, butterkaka, or havreflarn. That's almond caramel cake, cinnamon buns or oatmeal cookies for any non-Swedish speakers out there.

Forget Paris – Fika is a moveable feast.

## Current CMCS Clients

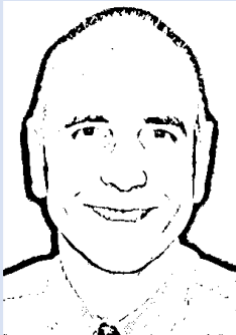
We are pleased to be working with York Region Centre for Community Safety, Community Living Thunder Bay, Canopy Support Services (formerly Tri-County Community Support Services), Community Living Port Colborne-Wainfleet, Community Visions and Networking (Quinte), Chatham-Kent Family Health Team, Community Living St. Catharines, Durham Youth Services, Community Living Association for South Simcoe, Camphill Community Services and Camphill Foundation Canada.

Recent clientele includes Literacy Network Northeast, Community Living Trent Highlands and Mill Creek Care Centre.

## About Tom Little and Nancy Collins

Tom Little and Nancy Collins are the principals of CMCS.

In addition to consulting for many years, Tom has been Executive Director of a large human service organization, experience he brings to the table when working with his non-profit clients. In his younger days he was lucky enough to be part of three Canadian champion hockey teams while attending the University of Toronto.



Nancy's background includes a degree from Wilfrid Laurier and working at a downtown Toronto law firm. In her spare time, at least when there is no pandemic, 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!



## Testimonials

*On behalf the Board of Directors, we would like to thank you very much for facilitating the work of creating a new strategic plan for our network. It was a pleasure to work with you and everything flowed smoothly. It is great to have this project complete! I hope we will get the opportunity to work together again in the future.* **Rita Delaurier, Executive Director, Literacy Network Northeast**

*Thank you so much (for your Board training)! Looking forward to the notes and your presentation was very well received! Lots of growth happening with the board and you helped steer more of that in the right direction. Really enjoy working with you and will keep you in mind for my other boards.* **Natasha Cosulich Vemb, Board of Directors, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Clarington**

*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**

## 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](mailto: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.

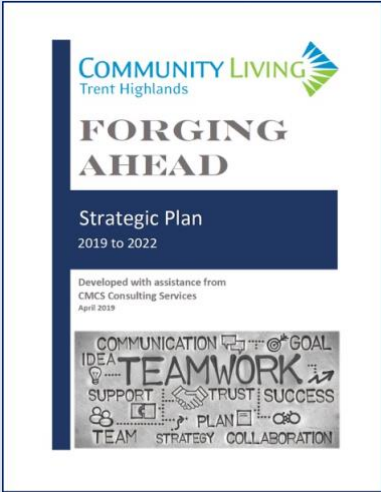
You don't just get ideas either. The book contains all kinds of resources for implementing them. For example, *BIG Ideas* includes samples of strategic and Board yearly action plans, and of evaluation formats Boards can use to rate their own work.

*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](mailto:info@cmcsconsulting.ca).

# More About CMCS

At CMCS, our specialty is strategic planning.



Since the start of 2018, the following 15 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
- E3 Community Services
- 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 even assisted a community radio station.

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

**CMCS Consulting Services**  
**97 Sherwood Avenue**  
**Oshawa, ON**  
**L1G3L7**  
**905 448 2428**  
**[www.cmcsconsulting.ca](http://www.cmcsconsulting.ca)**  
**[cmcs@cmcsconsulting.ca](mailto:cmcs@cmcsconsulting.ca)**