

# Tom Little's **BIG IDEAS**

for Non-Profits

## In This Edition

October 5 -9, 2020

**Have My Back But Stay Off My Back**  
**Slow Down! What's Your Hurry?**  
**ONCA in 2021?**  
**You Can Never Communicate Enough**

*BIG Ideas offers the variety pack this week. One article is on the Board-CEO/Executive Director relationship, one on the long-promised Ontario not-for-profit corporations act and one on the importance of communication. The last is cosmic in scale, but of course that's what you have come to expect from BIG Ideas.*

*We also have a survey for Board members and management personnel on situations where a Board supported a CEO/ED through managing a challenging issue (or not).*

*Last, a quick reminder that at CMCS we are operating as before, just remotely. If you want to do planning, get training or hold a retreat, we can help.*

# Have My Back But Stay Off My Back

## The Story

“What I really appreciate about my Board is that it stays off my back while having my back”. So observed a non-profit CEO recently, by way of commenting on and complimenting the Board of Director’s governance efforts.

We know that the best Board/CEO relationships are considered to be partnerships, but it might be worthwhile to look more closely at these two actions as a critical element of such a partnership.

## Having Their Back

First, let’s talk about having the CEO/Ed’s back. Many situations can arise where the Board can be called on to do just that. Here are a few I can think of:

- The CEO/ED is making changes to the management structure and Board members are getting an earful on the side from a long-time employee who is well-connected and who doesn’t want to go along with what is being proposed.
- The CEO/ED has found evidence of possible fraud by the organization’s Finance Director and the Finance Director, sensing her game is up, is telling the Board that the CEO/ED is the problem and should be fired.
- The organization’s government funder is unhappy with the CEO/ED and is advising the Board accordingly, because the CEO/ED has been vocal in opposition to recently-announced government policy changes.
- A person served by the organization has died and the local media is all over the story.

These instances call for the Board to support the CEO/ED, either by actively entering the fray in defence of the actions of the CEO/ED or by not giving credence to the position of the other party.

## Staying Off Their Back

The concept of staying off the CEO/ED’s back points us to the age-old non-profit issue of the relative roles of Boards and management.

By and large, today’s prevailing wisdom that Boards govern and CEO/ED’s operate has been embraced by most non-profit organizations. But we know that even in 2020, such a principle is not always respected. Here I am reminded of a story told by a CEO/ED of the board member who, uninvited, moved into an adjacent office at its headquarters and started offering unsolicited advice on how to run the organization.

For those Boards that don’t focus on providing leadership and managing themselves, and instead default to the third role of a Board, which is oversight, it can be challenging for them to move away from the notion that their only job is to monitor what the CEO/ED is doing.

The best Boards give unwavering support and operating latitude to the CEO/ED.

## The Skinny

In fairness, there may be times when Boards can't have the CEO/ED's back or stay off it. This is when the CEO/ED is not up to the job. As a Board member observed recently at a governance training session my colleague Nancy Collins and I facilitated, oversight should be the easiest of the three Board tasks, and therefore there should be lots of time for the Board to provide leadership and managing itself. But there can be situations when the Board does need to step in, because the CEO lacks the requisite skills and the organization is suffering. Fortunately, in my experience those situations are few and far between.

## The BIG Idea

My BIG Idea for this week is for non-profit Boards to adopt the mantra: "We have our CEO/ED's back without getting on her/his back".

Have you had experience, good or bad with Boards having/not having their CEO/ED's back or staying off/not staying off their backs? If so, and you want to share, go to our BIG Ideas survey -

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/GOT-THEIR-BACK>

# Emails... We Get Emails

## ONCA in 2021?

Mark Blumberg, a Toronto lawyer specializing in non-profits, monitors important legal developments, such as the introduction of the Ontario Not-for-Profit Corporations Act (ONCA). Monitoring ONCA has been a long-term undertaking for Mark, since it was supposed to come into force in 2012. He has been on the watch since, periodically advising that there was nothing to advise about.



In a recent posting, Mark explained the current situation:

"Still no word on when the Ontario government will bring in ONCA. Perhaps January 1, 2021, or perhaps not." So the beat goes on.

A number of BIG Ideas readers have sent us requests recently for a copy of our booklet on transitioning to the new Not-for-Profit Corporations Act, which we are more than happy to share. Transitioning involves a number of steps and will take up to a year to complete. At the same time, it is an opportunity to look at a number of issues related to your non-profit including your name, purpose, number of Board members, qualifications of Board members, number of terms and use of technology for your Board meetings. If you want to make important changes, now could be the time.

Bear in mind, that if you don't want to wait any longer for ONCA, you can transition to the Canada Not-for-Profit Corporations Act, which is very similar and has been in effect for a number of years.

Mark didn't throw this idea out, but maybe there is a good explanation for Ontario's slowness. Perhaps someone at Queen's Park made a mistake in the beginning and reversed the 1 and the 2. Maybe it was always intended as 2021, but it came out as 2012 and they were too embarrassed to admit their error.

## This Week's TomBit

### Slow Down! What's Your Hurry?

Earlier this year, I wrote that even when we were all locked down and were prohibited from travelling, we were moving, be it only slightly, a few centimeters a year, because the ground under us, the earth's crust, was moving, west, at a very slow rate.

With time on my hands in the evenings, thanks to COVID, I have been watching documentaries on our solar system and rest of the universe. As a result, I can tell you that this is a mere drop in the bucket compared with other ways in which we are all moving, even while standing still.



Did you know that right now you are moving at a speed of:

- 1,200 kilometers per hour, because the earth is spinning on its axis at that speed?
- 107,000 kilometers per hour, because the earth is orbiting the sun at that speed?
- 720,000 kilometers per hour, because the whole Milky Way galaxy, including our planet, Earth, is rotating at that speed, around its centre?
- 403,000 kilometers per hour, because while all this is going on, the entire Milky Way galaxy, while spinning, is also moving that quickly through space?

The earth rotates on its axis once a day and around the sun every 365 days, but it takes 250 million years for it to complete one rotation of the Milky Way galaxy. So, while you will experience many days and years of spinning and orbiting, it is unlikely that, in your lifetime, you will make it back to where you started in the galaxy. If that is disappointing, take solace in knowing that you will also not be there for the collision of the Milky Way with our next closest galaxy, the Andromeda, projected to take place 4 billion years in the future.

Perhaps we can't feel the wind in our hair, but in fact, we are all part of a great cosmic adventure.

# 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 2014.*



## You Can Never Communicate Enough

Communication is important. It imparts information. It builds a bond. It delivers the important message that people are valued.

So how do organizations ensure their employees communicate with each other, including those working in different departments?

There are a variety of tools at your disposal:

- First, make communicating a core value of the organization. Since information can equate to power, there are people who like to hoard it. Ensure that everyone is clear that sharing information is a commitment that runs throughout and can't be abrogated.
- Hire with communication in mind. If communicating is a core commitment, recruit people who are effective communicators.
- Provide training in communication and include that skill in performance evaluations.
- Take advantage of organizational processes, especially planning, to open up communication about the organization. Solicit input from people at all levels. When coalescing that input, share departmental plans within management, and vet them in every member of the management team. Ensure that what happens in one department is known and understood by the others, and avoid problems that come with "I didn't know they were going to do THAT!" Once completed, share the plans with staff, and keep people updated on progress.
- Use internal email to keep people informed, and remember that you usually have to say something more than once for it to stick.
- Hold regular departmental and interdepartmental meetings. If you have the resources, consider a yearly retreat that is open to staff at all levels.
- Review your management structure and consider combining responsibilities to reduce the silo effect - for example, some human service organizations assign management duties in residential and day services to the same people in an attempt to avoid this problem.
- Locate your managers close to the action rather than at head office, and ensure they are present within each location on a regular basis. If your programs run 24/7, require managers to visit during the evenings, over night and on weekends.
- Don't shoot the messenger. Create a culture that encourages open and frank discussion. It doesn't help if people feel they can't put some issues on the table because the recipient might be upset, or they might be sanctioned for it.

In a book called *In Search of Excellence*, author Tom Peters asked a president the secret of his company's success. His response was: "Tom, I don't think I can make this complicated enough for you: We talk to each other."

My BIG Idea for this week then, is just that: *Talk to each other.*

## 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](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 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.