

# Tom Little's **BIG IDEAS**

for Non-Profits

## In This Edition

October 19 - 23, 2020

**Next In Board Models: Collaborative Boards?**

**COVID-19 and Board/Employee Workloads**

**Thanksgiving Follow-Up and Request for Ideas from Readers**

**The Acknowledgement Disconnect**

*Our lead article is about collaboration and its importance to some non-profit Boards of Directors. This week's email commentary focuses on how COVID-19 has affected the workloads of non-profit Boards and employees. TomBits adds to last week's story of the Thanksgiving adventure that was the birth of Tom's first child, then asks for ideas for making virtual meetings accessible to everyone. Blast From The Past speaks to the right and wrong way to acknowledge volunteers.*

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

# Next in Board Models: Collaborative Boards?

## The Story

Does being collaborative point the way to the next thing in models for non-profit Boards of Directors? By which we mean working collaboratively with the most senior employee hired by the Board to direct the work of the organization.

A closer examination of the nature of the relationship between Boards and the most senior employee supports this idea. While the Board has the legal responsibility to “supervise management”, the CEO/ED has control over the organizational resources. For the wise Board, is there really any other choice than to collaborate?

Being collaborative makes sense in other ways as well, since it respects the time constraints that are on volunteer Boards. They have small time windows in terms of the hours they can devote to exercising governance, while CEOs/EDs have large time windows for operating the organization from day to day.

## The Skinny

For the backstory on this discussion of Board models, let's rely on Vic Murray of the University of Victoria for a couple of observations. According to Vic of UVic, there is no one Board model that works best for all non-profits, but having one results in a better organization. Further, the best model is one that is unique to the organization and reflects its environment, history, personalities and organizational culture.

If we accept Vic's research findings, we would say that best practice for non-profit Boards is to adopt a governance model, either one that has already been formulated or one that the Board creates.

Among the non-profits my colleague Nancy Collins and I work with, the predominant model is the Policy Board, whereby the key role of the Board is to approve policy. Those policies that pertain to operations are then executed by the employees, under the leadership of the CEO/ED. A major benefit of this model is the delineation of role between the Board and the CEO/ED.

But there would be nothing stopping a Board from saying that instead of being a Policy Board, it wanted its key principle to be collaboration. In such a scenario it would flesh out how that principle would drive its work as a Board. Policies could still be important, just not predominate the Board's approach to governance. Or it could be both a Policy Board and a Collaborative Board. (There are other options too, like the one we advocate for, which is the Planning Board model.)

## The BIG Idea

To be clear, models don't provide a total “how-to” for the work of a non-profit Board. But they do offer focus. So, my BIG Idea for this week is that if your Board hasn't adopted a model, or is not content with its current model, consider embracing the concept of being collaborative. Bear in mind too that the

appeal and range of this principle could go beyond the relationship with the CEO/ED and the employee group, and encompass its approach to other stakeholders as well.

## Emails... We Get Emails

### COVID-19 and Board Workloads

In my email conversations with people involved with non-profits, I am always on the lookout for input to, and observations about, current issues that are impacting them. Of course, right now this includes COVID-19.

Many of those I communicate with provide residential services and have been significantly affected by the need to safeguard their clientele, their employees and the broader community.

One of the things that has been notable is that while management and first line employees have spent many hours and gone to great lengths in terms of prevention and providing services differently, COVID has not added substantially to the workload of their non-profit Boards.

Yes, the Boards have met remotely, by Zoom or other communication software. Yes, they have exercised their due diligence by requiring regular reports on strategy and results. But with a few exceptions, their role has been limited to ensuring management has the situation in hand. I have been particularly impressed with the extent to which those management groups indicate they recognized the threat early, mobilized early, avoided the worst of the infection or kept it out altogether.



## This Week's TomBit

Last week, I wrote about how important Thanksgiving was to me, because in addition to being grateful for the harvest, it meant celebrating once again the birth of my daughter and the adventure that event had involved, one that culminated in her arrival in this world on the evening of Thanksgiving Day Monday, many years ago.

Profiled prominently in that adventure was the lunch I packed, a step recommended at the prenatal classes I attended. Labour could take a while, the instructors explained, and there was no reason both of you should go hungry. Perhaps it wasn't surprising that, sometime after that wonderful Thanksgiving Day, my wife was in the grocery store and passed a woman she thought she recognized. The other person looked at her too. Indeed, it



was one of the nurses from our Thanksgiving Day arrival-of-first-child adventure. The nurse said: “I do remember you. You were the one whose husband had that lunch. That was the biggest lunch we had ever seen.” And here I thought I was just being well-prepared.

On an entirely different topic, many non-profits have been holding virtual annual meetings because of COVID. By and large these seem to be working well. However, at a recent Board training event I was leading, a Board member noted that some members of her organization missed out because they didn’t have access to the technology needed. So here, I am asking for input from any BIG Ideas readers who have encountered this problem and come up with a solution. Let me know and I will pass that information on to all readers in a future edition – [info@cmcsconsulting.ca](mailto:info@cmcsconsulting.ca)

## 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.*



### The Acknowledgement Disconnect

If you use volunteers, you need to know that there is a big disconnect between how volunteers want to be recognized, and how most non-profit organizations go about providing it. And it may be that there are lessons here that can be applied to recognizing front line staff as well.

The “2013 Volunteer Recognition Study”, conducted by Volunteer Canada and funded by Investors Group, showed that 80% of volunteers want to be thanked by hearing about how their work made a difference to the organization and 70% by being thanked in person, and on an ongoing, informal basis.

Compare this with the recognition practices of organizations, where 60% use banquets and formal gatherings and 50% some form of public acknowledgement. The study showed that only a few volunteers wanted to be recognized in a public forum.

If current practices don’t cut it, how should volunteers be acknowledged? The study concludes that there are a variety of ways to say thanks that resonate with the recipient, but that each volunteer should be acknowledged individually, according to her/his own preferences. “Volunteer recognition is a continuum that requires a variety of initiatives. It’s important to try to offer different forms of recognition (formal and informal), customized for different individuals.”

Other criteria apply to acknowledgement as well. The study suggests that volunteers want recognition that is sincere and authentic. It concludes that people appreciate a personalized thank you. But pay heed to the demographic of your volunteer pool: “Younger people expressed a higher preference for more concrete expressions of recognition – certificates, letters of reference, small gifts and nomination for awards.”

Looking beyond acknowledgement of impact and receipt of “thank-you’s”, volunteers of all ages like the idea of getting together socially on an informal basis. The point isn’t to spend a lot of money on the event, but to allow people to meet their peers and enjoy time away from other aspects of their lives.

If some of this sounds familiar, it should. A few weeks ago, I wrote about the importance of acknowledgement of staff performance. At that time, I noted that acknowledgement should be:

- As Soon As Possible - Timing is important; don't delay praise
- As Sincere As Possible - Do it because you're truly appreciative
- As Specific As Possible - Give details of the achievement
- As Personal As Possible - Do it in person (or a handwritten note)
- As Positive As Possible - Don't mix in criticism
- As Proactive As Possible - Don't wait for perfect performance

So, my BIG Idea for this week is to build a culture of acknowledgement for volunteers and to use what you learn to enhance your approach to staff. Identify a range of recognition options and choose those that appeal to each person individually. Bear in mind that your staff may be like the volunteers in the research study, and not be looking for the kind of recognition you have been providing. Be aware too that your demographic will influence what resonates and therefore the options you choose.

## Current CMCS Clients

We are pleased to be working with Community Living Thunder Bay, Haliburton Housing, Canopy Support Services (formerly 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 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.