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Creating Community Governance: A View from the Inside

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ABSTRACT

Recently, Margaret Wheatley (2008) described the current times as an era of “powerful possibilities”. In that spirit, in this paper we reflect on efforts directed towards creating a system of community governance. We report on work that was done over the past few years by the board and executive of the Whitby Mental Health Center (WMHC) to become a catalyst for community governance within southern Ontario in Canada. To understand this model of governance Renz says we need to make two important conceptual shifts; (1) separating “governance” as a function from the “board” as a context or setting and (2) moving from a focus on the single free standing organization to a network of interorganizational alliances. Renz points out that he is not talking about “networked organizations” but of “networks as organizations” or non-hierarchical systems that link multiple constituents to work on matters of shared interest.

The WMHC is a stand alone psychiatric hospital founded in 1919 and operated by the Ministry of Health until 2006 when responsibility for its management was transferred to a community based board of directors. WMHC provides a range of specialized, tertiary care mental health programs to both inpatients and outpatients throughout its primary service area. With over 1000 staff, 329 inpatient beds and several satellite locations in the community it is a critical provider of mental health services in the region. As part of its efforts to improve governance at WMHC the board decided to explore the possibility of expanding its role from the traditional internally focussed functions (such as exercising its fiduciary responsibilities, strategic planning and reviewing the performance of the CEO) to also look at possible roles it could play in helping the region move into more “community governance”.

The process of moving toward community governance is described in the paper and the key steps include:

- results of interviews with key stakeholders in the community,
- description of a community meeting hosted by WMHC to feedback the results of the interviews and invite dialogue about what might be possible,
- a board retreat to explore the implications for strategic planning, governance and management of new ways of working and
- on-going dialogues between the board chair and the CEO about how to move this project ahead.

Some of the challenges in the process are also described in the paper. For example, many people, including board members of the hospital, misunderstood the intention of the process that was developed and framed “community governance” as key stakeholders coming together to tell the board of the hospital what they see as key strategic priorities for the hospital to address in order to meet the needs of the community. In that model community governance is seen as a type of consultation process but each stakeholder and community group remains independent and autonomous at the level of operations, strategy as well as governance although some operational collaborations and sharing of information may be possible. What the leadership at Whitby was actually thinking about when they described community governance was much more transformational, systemic, interdependent and difficult for people to grasp. They were willing to give up some of their autonomy to make decisions, to set direction and to control outcomes in order to seek what is best for the community broadly defined. They were hoping to identify mutual interests beyond conflicting interests and to be more outwardly focused in thinking about governance. They did not see this as abdicating conventional governance responsibilities but rather adding to them responsibilities to think about what was also good for the community and the broader system.

As reflected in the following table the board asked themselves questions about their mindset and assumptions and the ways they might need to adjust their board focus, practices and structure in order to move ahead with community governance.

| Old Mindset | New Mindset |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintenance focus • Single organization • Short term • Responsive to government -reactive • Past orientation • Scarcity assumptions • Incremental change • Simple • Traditional leadership • Telling and Selling | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generative/learning focus • Community/multiple organizations • Long term • Proactive – opportunity focussed • Build for Future • Abundance assumptions • Incremental looking for discontinuities • Complex/ systemic • Distributed and new leadership models • Co-leading in the creation of a community voice • Partnerships |

They also looked at:

- Governance structures (e.g. committees, taskforces) – does a new function require a new structure?
- Board composition and selection criteria for new members
- Relationships between board and staff

- Agendas of Board meetings
- Board Culture (values, rituals and disciplined practices)
- Strategic Planning Process (e.g. scenario planning and opportunity identification)
- Strategic Plan - Where we are positioned and the niche we fill
- Relationships with community members and other stakeholders (new partners?)
- Resource allocation
- Board Roles (moving beyond fiduciary responsibilities)
- Board Training and Orientation

Conclusions:

In this paper in addition to describing the process we explore the implications of efforts moving toward community governance both for governance practice and theory. In reflection we conclude some of the following.

- We need new skill sets for Board Chairs and members and in particular new mindsets (Wheatley, 2008) that include systems thinking, facilitation skills, chaos and complexity science theory knowledge and ways of thinking critically
- Leadership must come from more than one part of the system and so the CEO and Board Chair of one organization can do a lot but they cannot do it all. Protection of turf and territoriality are natural but will not allow for system transformation (Light, 2008).
- Within the WMHC board there was a fear that they were facing risk if seen to be failing in the adequately doing their traditional governance functions and being seen to be doing their fiduciary responsibilities. In a broader context where change was not celebrated it was threatening for many to envision letting go of control and being a traditional leader. Perhaps we need to think about new board structures and ways of allocating responsibilities so that the board can take on more leadership and governance at the level of the system.
- During all this it is still important for the board and the Executive officer/management to deal with the internal management and governance of the organization. Both/and thinking is essential so the board does not abandon internal issues but they cannot overtake the systems wide focus.
- We have learned that strong partnerships externally are not possible without strong partnerships between the Board Chair and the CEO.
- There are real challenges in collaboration and system focus within an environment of scarce resources. Such a context naturally generates fear and threat to existence and diminishing growth.

Overall we would like to conclude with a sense of optimism and hope for new models of community governance. Unfortunately, we are finding it hard not to get discouraged. With little evidence of success and no way of tracking outcomes it is sometimes hard to keep being enthusiastic. At the governance level we can embed the space for possibility and create the context for community governance. When one level is harder to move ahead on we have been able to shift our focus and energy, adapt and at times back off. Resistance springs up in sometimes unexpected places

and we do not know where our efforts may lead in the process of “getting to maybe” (Westley, Zimmerman & Patton, 2007). We hope that is sharing this story and what we have learned we can help others to dialogue about community governance and to examine what the possibilities for change are. We think these times call for new mindsets.

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