

Governing for Partnership Success

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Introduction

As community partnerships establish or expand their membership and start developing their comprehensive community pictures, the need for clarity around roles and responsibilities, structure, and governance start to emerge. Governance is acknowledged as a key factor in the success of partnerships, coalitions, organizations, as well as governments; it is needed anytime a group of people come together to accomplish a goal. Partnerships and coalitions run smoothly and are more effective when an agreed upon, appropriate governance structure is in place to support their many functions.

This resource describes a variety of governance approaches and models and provides practical suggestions for choosing a structure or form that will support the initiatives being undertaken by your partnership. The article outlines three main functions of governance and then suggests several structures or styles of organizing that are suitable for community-based, multi-sectoral partnerships. Principles of 'good governance' are also outlined.

GOVERNANCE MODELS AND APPROACHES

Governance models and approaches are continually evolving in response to the complexity of issues that organizations are facing, along with the diversity of partners who are addressing them (Seel and Ilgriff, 2006). In many cases, traditional models of governance are proving to be ill-equipped to consider multi-faceted problems and to deliver comprehensive, holistic approaches and solutions (Renz, 2006).

In addition, governance structures often vary between for-profit and not-for-profit organizations where mandates and stakeholder interests may be vastly different. Organizations and community groups may historically have functioned with an elected board of directors, bylaws, formal committees, and membership criteria. **Now the trend is toward a shared, participative leadership style, reflective learning, and a focus on ‘sense-making’.** (For more on this, see the description of generative governance that follows.)

There are many models of governance that non-profit organizations and other entities such as coalitions and partnerships can consider. Carter McNamara has written extensively on non-profit governance structures and the reader is referred to his work for more detailed descriptions of these structures and their suitability to specific contexts (McNamara, 2008).

It is helpful to think of governance styles in terms of the specific key functions of the decision-making body. In the book, *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards*, the authors describe three main types of governance: fiduciary, strategic, and generative (Chait, Ryan and Taylor, 2005). **Fiduciary** boards tend to focus on facts, figures, finances, and reports, with the board’s core work being technical – overseeing operations and ensuring accountability. **Strategic** boards, as the name suggests, are more interested in competitive analysis and strategic planning; the board’s core function is that of shaping strategy and reviewing performance. The **generative** governance approach places less importance on rules, operations, accountability, and bureaucracy; instead, it is more interested in team-oriented, principles-based direction setting, and accountability for learning excellence. Generative governance encourages small group reflection and learning, where members consider key questions such as: What does it mean to govern? What do we need to know to work in a new way? How will we organize ourselves to achieve this? (Seel and Ilfirgg, 2006).

It is important to note that one approach style isn’t necessarily better or than another. The authors of *Governance as Leadership* stress that “Governance... is more than working in one mode. It involves choosing when to operate in which mode. It is a complex activity.” (Chait et al, 2005). **Determining the most appropriate mode for the purpose at hand is an ongoing governance task for partnership leaders and members to consider.**

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “GOVERNANCE”?

Anyone who has participated in a partnership can attest to the fact that governance is seldom neat or straightforward. Rather, governance is often “messy, tentative, unpredictable and fluid” (Corkery, 1999). The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines governance as “the act of looking after and making decisions about something.” The Institute On Governance based in Ottawa, defines governance as “the process whereby societies or organizations make their important decisions, determine who has voice, who is engaged in the process and how account is rendered.” It is the art of “steering societies and organizations” (Ledwell, 2008).

FORM SUPPORTING FUNCTION

In addition to considering the key functions of the governing body, one of the first tasks that partnerships often address is to select a structure or style of organizing that allows the group to work and communicate efficiently and effectively. **A governance structure should be easy to understand and navigate, yet sufficiently complex to account for the various responsibilities and activities being undertaken.** The most significant factors to consider are:

1. The size and complexity of the partnership including the:
 - ▶ level of formality or bureaucracy of participating agencies;
 - ▶ decision-making authority of participants;
 - ▶ number of participating organizations;
 - ▶ stability of the membership; and
 - ▶ geographic location of participants, which could impact meeting and communication styles.
2. The complexity of the work being undertaken, including the:
 - ▶ number of initiatives being considered or implemented at one time;
 - ▶ diversity of participants involved in project or committee work;
 - ▶ political sensitivity of the work; and
 - ▶ timelines and deliverables.





Sometimes groups will select a structure that has served them well historically. In some cases, a structure is predetermined by a funder or sponsoring agency. However, certain styles of organizing tend to be more appropriate for different types of activities, stages of group development, or levels of formality required by the group or funder. The Institute for Conservation Leadership has described six general styles of organizing, each having a distinct purpose, structure, authority, and decision-making framework. The Institute's work helps groups to consider which structure is best suited for their current or anticipated work and membership. The six styles are outlined briefly below. For a more detailed description of each of the six organizing styles, visit the Institute's website at www.icl.org.

Information Networks and **Associations** are typically used for sharing information and service coordination. They have a relatively loose structure that allows members to have periodic interaction.

In **Coordinated Projects**, two or more groups coordinate to work together and share resources to address specific issues or programs. They typically have steering committees, work groups, and task forces to carry out the work.

In **Campaign Coalitions**, groups come together to coordinate and mobilize the energies and resources of multiple groups on a single issue (often policy-related) in order to wield a larger influence and achieve common goals. Members participate at varying levels of engagement. A centralized, shared decision-making authority or group, representative of the key coalition member organizations, is in place to react quickly to time sensitive decisions. Leadership and staffing are allocated from member groups and they are accountable to the decision-making body.

More formalized groups, including **Ongoing Partnerships** and **Multi-Stakeholder** groups, function with more formal, written legal agreements that outline the roles, responsibilities, and contributions of member groups.

ORGANIZING FOR SUCCESS

Partnerships often form various types of committees or work groups to either ‘steer’ or ‘do’ specific tasks. It is important that committee members are clear on the scope of their activities and their authority to make decisions; these are best articulated in terms of reference. Committees typically carry out one of the following two functions:

1. Completing preparatory work leading up to a decision by the larger group, such as developing policy options or recommendations for consideration.
2. Carrying out tasks on behalf of the larger group, such as fundraising or community relations.

The following descriptions of committee types have been adapted from the United Way’s former website on board development.

A **standing committee** is the most common type of committee. Members of standing committees study problems within an assigned area and provide specialized assistance and advice to the larger group. Examples include: executive, membership, personnel, finance, fundraising, and steering committees. A standing committee frequently has extensive authority and responsibility to accomplish its work. The larger group usually follows the advice and recommendations of a standing committee.

An **ad hoc committee** is formed to handle a specific situation or issue that falls outside of the assigned function of an existing standing committee. It is dissolved when the job is completed. Examples of the assignments of ad hoc committees include: arranging a conference, preparing a presentation to a funder, and conducting an environmental scan. Depending on the situation, an ad hoc committee may have extensive authority and responsibility. The larger group usually takes all advice and recommendations from an ad hoc committee.

Advisory committees give advice on any issues for which it requests data, for example, policy, research, or communications. What distinguishes advisory committees from the others is that the larger group is under no obligation to take the advice or recommendations that it puts forward (although it frequently does). Advisory committees tend to be used only occasionally. They are usually time-limited, typically dissolving after the work for which they provided advice is complete.



If a partnership is relatively small and cohesive, with a focus on a few concrete activities, then a steering committee with ad hoc working committees that have clearly assigned responsibilities and authority may be all that is needed.

Conversely, if a group is in the formative stage, the nature of work unclear or the role of participants yet to be determined, a fluid, flexible approach might be better suited. This might take the form of a small steering committee of dedicated individuals who make decisions on behalf of the larger group on strategic and financial matters. Ad hoc working committees might be formed for specific tasks such as proposal writing, situational assessments, or community engagement.

As the work of a partnership develops in a certain strategic direction, additional expertise, advice, or resources may be required. In this case, an advisory committee might be formed, where non-members with a particular expertise gather to advise and assist the partnership in a specific area.

It is also important to consider urban and rural contexts, as well as the ability of participants to meet in person or remotely through technology. Having monthly or quarterly committee meetings may not be feasible where long distance travel is required and the technology to telecommute is not present or is prohibitively expensive.

WORKING TOWARD ‘GOOD GOVERNANCE’

Once partnerships have decided on a governance approach and a supporting structure, they are ready to consider the elements of ‘good governance’ that will guide and sustain future efforts. **Good governance enables an organization or partnership to do its work and fulfill its mission. It’s about achieving desired results and achieving them in the right way** (UN Development Programme, 1997). At a more practical level, Edgar, Marshall and Bassett (2006) suggest that key qualities of good governance include:

- ▶ that those in positions of power are perceived to have acquired their power legitimately;
- ▶ that there is appropriate voice accorded to those whose interests are affected by decisions; and
- ▶ that there is good communication between staff, partnership members and stakeholders.

The following principles and characteristics have been adapted from the article *Partnerships: Putting Good Governance Principles into Action* (Edgar et al, 2006) and serve as a checklist of good governance principles that partnerships can work toward.

For more guidance, see HC Link’s collection of resources on [Partnership Development](#).

Partnership Development

- ▶ Everyone who needs to be is at the table.
- ▶ Membership review and partnership recruitment are ongoing functions.
- ▶ All partners believe they receive sufficient value from the partnership.
- ▶ There are adequate resources to build and maintain the partnership.
- ▶ The different contexts in which the partners work are understood and accepted.

Legitimacy and Voice

- ▶ Consideration and accommodations are made to include individuals from priority groups.
- ▶ There are diverse opportunities for bringing partners together.
- ▶ Discussions are constructed so that various voices are heard and the dialogue is genuine and respectful.
- ▶ The group strives for consensus whenever possible.



Leadership and Strategic Vision

- ▶ The leadership style is supported by the membership.
- ▶ Leadership roles are shared among the members as appropriate.
- ▶ All parties share a joint and clearly articulated vision of their goal.
- ▶ Each member of the partnership sees how their organization can contribute to the vision and have adjusted to any changes to the vision that have occurred over time.
- ▶ Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined.

Performance and Evaluation

- ▶ All participants agree on the criteria for success.
- ▶ The framework for performance measurement and reporting is developed jointly.
- ▶ Performance is monitored and reported.

Accountability

- ▶ The host agency or lead organization's project accountabilities are clear to all participants.
- ▶ There is an open, transparent, and accountable relationship between partners.
- ▶ The accountability of participants to their respective organizations is recognized and respected.
- ▶ The effectiveness of the partnership is reported publicly.

Conclusion

There is no one, 'right' recipe for creating a governance structure that would suit the complexity, work, and preferences of any two partnerships. Governance arrangements need to be individually tailored to take into account the partnership's mission, stage of development, and work to be completed. As long as there is agreement, understanding, and support for the chosen configuration, many models can work. What may be as important as the final structure selected is the process by which groups, discuss, deliberate, and decide on a structure, and then adapt it over time as the partnership evolves.

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