

Excerpt from an Essay on Governance

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Consider this paper a feature length film about boards of directors. We will pan the camera around to take in some interesting considerations about governance, play with lighting to understand the subtleties of policy development, and use theme music to illustrate the central features of our topic. The story is not a straight line. It is a panoply of ideas, considerations and imperatives. It will not be dull. It will be controversial, humorous and at least interesting. I hope you may even find it compelling and of value to understand how boards work and how boards must work if they are to fulfill their significant responsibilities to themselves and to our society.

The lights are dimming, the curtain is opening, the music begins. I'll take my popcorn without butter thanks. The camera opens on hundreds of thousands of not-for profit human service organizations.

In this shot of human services I include service clubs, local and international environment protection organizations, children's activities, sports associations, hospitals, community mental health programs, services for older adults, support programs for persons with a developmental disability, child welfare, women's shelters, counseling agencies and schools. There a vast number of organizations providing thousands of different programs, services and opportunities for people. As we gaze at this picture we are struck by the sheer variety and huge numbers.

The array of organizations, associations and groups in this gathering informs us that we rely on them for a lot: fun and exercise, growth and learning, healing and support, social well-being and environmental protection. This view indicates that not only are these organizations plentiful but they are important to our lives in many ways. The array of services they provide and purposes they fulfill tells us that they are not on the periphery but are fundamental to how we live. If each of these organizations depends on the presence and functioning of a board of directors, then boards are not boring but crucial to much of our life in society.

If we change our view to the lens of history we can see these organizations being formed at different points in time by people from many walks of life. A zoom lens shows us that each of these organizations owes its creation to a different set of interests or needs in the community. We see hospitals dotting the landscape as far back as the earliest settlers. There are child welfare agencies first appearing in the mid 1800's to provide for children where families cannot. At the turn of the century we witness the development of large mental hospitals in rural areas and beside bodies of water where it is believed people can heal in the tranquility of nature. In the 1940's, community mental health associations begin to grow as communities become concerned for the emotional and mental well-being of family, friends and neighbours who have been locked away in these institutions. During the 1950's a movement of parents concerned for their children with a developmental disability emerges and grows across the country. Within a decade they are establishing boards of directors and calling themselves associations for the mentally retarded. As communities become more urbanized we notice Block Parent programs being initiated to provide for the safety of children walking to and from school.

In the 1950's smog appears on the horizon and we spy the beginnings of environmental movements. These organizations number in the mere hundreds world-wide by the latter 1950's. Within 40 years their number increases to more than 20,000.¹ It is even more fascinating to consider the growth in members of these environmental movements. By the end of the millennium the leading organization has 1,000,000 members.² Moreover we see the emergence of global planning and international co-operation among not for profits as issues and social needs transcend the confines of national boundaries.

The changes in society seem to accelerate as we watch. Shelters are being built to protect women who suffer from the abuse of male husbands and partners. Food banks are established for those who no longer have full time employment or any employment at all. Facilities for the homeless are being carved from grand old public buildings or industrial sites. The panorama of agencies and organizations goes on. But we have already noticed several significant features about them.

¹ Edward O. Wilson, *The Future of Life*, Alfred A Knopf, New York, 2002, p. 165 - 166

² *Ibid* p.167

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They appear when people begin to coalesce around a social issue. Often the individuals come from different walks of life. They share some beliefs in common but are opposed on others. Their lifestyles vary but they agree on certain aspects of how people need to live. They debate the form and priorities of the organizations they found. They struggle with their differences. But in almost all cases there comes a point at which they agree to join together and a new organization is formed.

While the interests that give rise to one organization may be different from those of another, these entities not only co-exist but also evolve into subsystems of mutual support relative to a group of clients or a common interest. For example a mental health program has strong working relationships with a psychiatric hospital and an employment agency in order to facilitate the return of people to work following a mental illness. Environmental agencies form a coalition among local conservation groups, aboriginal peoples, governments and philanthropic organizations to focus attention and resources on a pressing international issue such as global warming or preservation of biological diversity. Human services thus create systems of support and contribute to the coalescing of interest in society. From this phenomenon we can deduce that human services tend to be inclusive in their outlook. The system of organizations not only tolerate co-existence but actively pursue co-operative and collaborative ventures. Organizations, like individuals, need to work together. We do not witness solitary autonomy. We are faced with the reality that people prefer and need to live and work together in social systems.

If we take a second look at the evolving picture we can identify another important characteristic of this system of organizations. Despite their diversity of purpose and the variation in their scope of activity, they share a common genesis. All of them attract concerned citizens acting on a need in the community or across communities. These people bring their differences of view to the issue and engage in dialogue so they understand one another. In many instances the interested parties may enter debate about goals, methods and priorities. We can experience the differences of view first hand if we go down the mountain and become directly involved in any organization.

At least as important as the differences are what these organizations hold in common. The people who come together tend to stay together around the issue or program or service. There is an overarching agreement and process that supercedes their differences.

The common genesis of these many organizations is identifiable in the continuing debates that take place and the agreements that are made. We see interested citizens, concerned parents and volunteers forming boards of directors and engaging one another in the search for what is most suitable to the greatest number or to the specific needs of particular groups of people in society. Boards are elected, establish direction, formulate policy to provide a framework for that direction and report to the membership. The process reminds us of how our governments work in a liberal democracy. Many boards, particularly those that take their accountability to the membership or community seriously are like a microcosm of our legislatures, albeit with lesser powers. There are also boards that pay little attention to their membership or who limit membership to a select few. We will explore this difference in more depth later. But for now let's get back to the panorama.

As we gaze across the time and space of so many organizations we notice that they come into being with an intensity of interest from people who are concerned about a need. Sometimes these organizations disappear. Their purpose may be fulfilled. Society may have changed and the need is no longer there. They may be amalgamated or subsumed into other organizations. The texture of the sector changes over time but the sector continues to live and grow. This tells us that these organizations are providing something we need and want. It is reasonable to state that they reflect our desire to forge community that is inclusive, responsive, supportive and diverse. The many people who are served by these organizations are enriched. Those who work as employees or volunteers bring their talents, education, experience and energy to their tasks.

The parallels between the government structures of a liberal democracy and boards of directors in the human services sector is not accidental. Nor is it incidental.