Governing Board Meetings and their Communication Dilemmas: Negotiating Leadership and Knowledge

A Position Paper by
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Boards of directors are crucial in providing governance and decision-making in nonprofit organizations. Boards are also a form of “citizen participation” and “as such, boards, contribute to an evolving democratic process” (Duca, 1996, p. 3). Lewis (2005) notes the importance of studying decision-making and governance in the civil society sector. On a practical level, nonprofit governance is an important area to study when considering the negative impact of flawed leadership that scandals from the United Way of America (Shenk, 2002), Adelphi University (Horikawa & Hempill, n.d.), and Milwaukee Public Museum (Milwaukee County Department of Audit, 2005) illustrate. On a theoretical level, nonprofit boards present interesting dilemmas and challenges for understanding organizational decision-making and leadership. The purpose of this position paper is to layout three challenges that nonprofit boards face from a communication perspective and to describe a research agenda for further investigation of nonprofit board communication. In presenting these issues, I highlight the following position: Nonprofit board meetings are significant communication sites for analyzing the discursive negotiation of decision-making and organizational identity. In developing this position, I draw from examples from the news and from a multi-year research project I have undertaken studying nonprofit board meetings in situ.
Challenges and Communication Dilemmas of Nonprofit Boards

There are (at least) three inter-related challenges that nonprofit boards face from a communication perspective: the tension between being leaders and possibly temporary volunteers; understanding and enacting their roles as board members; and, members’ background knowledge of the organization. Nonprofit board have important responsibilities for organizations that include making important decisions on issues such as organizational mission, strategic planning, and executive hiring and evaluation. Board responsibilities also include the fiscal stability and development of the organization in the form of monitoring the organization’s finances and participating actively in fundraising.

As a case study, Enron’s board illustrates the importance of effective board governance in that as more information became known about Enron’s shady practices, more became known about the board’s role in standing by and in various ways contributing, through a lack of involvement, Enron’s fraudulent practices (http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/02_30/b3793720.htm). Board members, however, can also be characterized as, for the most part, temporary volunteers. While board members may be paid, according to one source, only 2% of boards pay financial compensation to their members (http://nonprofit.about.com/od/nonprofitbasics/f/boardcomp.htm). In addition, a standard recommendation to boards have terms and term limits for their members (http://www.boardsource.org/Knowledge.asp?ID=3.388). Basically, boards are expected to be leaders but may have fluid membership in the organization because of their temporary and typically volunteer status. This issue relates directly to the other two challenges faced by nonprofit boards.
Nonprofit board members must also have knowledge of how a board operates and its function in relation to the organization. Boards must strike a balance between providing oversight and strategic direction while not micromanaging the operations of the organization (http://www2.guidestar.org/rxa/news/articles/2010/five-challenges-facing-nonprofit-boards.aspx). Board members must also be informed of basic board operation procedures as simple as meeting guidelines such as Robert’s Rules of Order. Therefore, the decision-making processes of a board involve not just making decisions, but understanding what type of decisions are within the jurisdiction of the board to make.

Finally, nonprofit board members should be informed of the key issues related to the organization’s mission. For example, it makes sense that a board for a senior residential facility should be informed and knowledgeable of trends and forecasts related to the aging population and their health and social needs. However, in the interest of having a diverse board, it is unlikely that all board members who join a given board will have specific and in depth background knowledge related to the organization’s vision.

In sum, because of the aforementioned challenges and dilemmas that a board faces, there are several areas of ambiguity that a board must deal with. These include ambiguity of roles, ambiguity of procedure, and ambiguity of knowledge.

A Proposal for a Research Agenda

In articulating a research agenda related to nonprofit boards, I highlight the unique research issues posed by analyzing nonprofit board member assimilation, board decision-making, and the role of meetings. A key point that these highlight is how board communication can be conceptualized as the moment-to-moment discursive negotiation of the organization.
“Organizational assimilation concerns the processes by which individuals become integrated into the culture of an organization” (Jablin, 2001 p. 755). The key areas of interest for this project are anticipatory socialization (how members learn beforehand of organizational expectations) and assimilation (how members learn of organizational expectations once they have joined the organization). These areas are the primary focus because of the differences in structure and roles between for-pay employment and voluntary experiences (Ashcraft & Kedrowicz, 2002) as well as between for-profit and nonprofit organizations (Gibson & Papa, 2000).

Anticipatory socialization often begins in childhood with the influence of a variety of sources such as family, school, part-time experiences, peers, and the media (Jablin, 2001). Research in this area assumes a vocational focus in that the assimilation messages are geared to preparing individuals for careers and for-pay work. More specifically, once an individual is about to enter a particular organization, there are several other sources of information and information-seeking strategies that she may use. Sources of information basically include organizational literature (i.e., reports, training material, job advertisements) and interpersonal interactions (i.e., current employees, interviewers, other applicants) (Jablin, 2001).

The sources of information involved with anticipatory socialization in general can also apply to the experiences to nonprofit board members. However, this assumption warrants exploration due to differences between nonprofit boards and for-pay employment. Nonprofit boards are voluntary with involvement more accurately

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1 This section on organizational assimilation is taken from an earlier paper presented by the author and M.J. Jiter at the 2008 Central States Communication Association convention.
characterized as *service* rather than vocation. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that individuals would experience anticipatory socialization through childhood messages.

Recognizing that organizational members are not passive but can and do play an active role in their own assimilation process (Saks & Ashforth, 1997), it is important to note that there are several information-seeking strategies that they may utilize. Jablin (2001) summarizes these strategies as: overt, indirect, third party, testing, disguising conversations, observing, and surveillance. While these same tactics are available to nonprofit board members, there are some differences between how boards are structured compared to for-pay work experiences that would present challenges in using certain information-seeking strategies. For example, face-to-face board member interactions occur mainly, if not exclusively, during board meetings. There is no physical place where board members may meet and mingle for informal communication. Also, boards are limited in how often they meet. Some boards may meet only once or twice a year and other boards may meet about once a month. Board member assimilation presents many challenges to more ‘traditional’ approaches that organizational members may utilize in learning about the culture of an organization.

An important function of nonprofit boards is decision-making. However, as described in the preceding section, boards face a great deal of ambiguity in decision-making (i.e., of roles, procedures, and knowledge). As described by Castor (2005), organizational decision-making can be as much a process of decision-making as it is a process of socially constructing reality in which part of the process of decision-making for a group involves negotiating the social meaning of key terms of the decision. Implicated in this process is also the negotiation of agency (Castor & Cooren, 2006) and
even of communication itself (Castor, 2007). Nonprofit board decision-making, therefore, is not just important to study because of the potential impact of decisions, but also because of what can be learned about nonprofit board communication and how boards cope with ambiguity and how they discursively construct the nonprofit during the process of decision-making.

Finally, nonprofit board meetings are important communication events for the board. Nonprofit board meetings are where, ideally board decisions are made. During an interview, a nonprofit board member described how one time, a fairly innocuous decision was made by a small group of individuals of a board outside of the context of the actual board meeting. When this decision was explained to the rest of the board, the interviewee objected and wanted the decision to be discussed by the entire board. The full board came to the same conclusion and decision as the sub-group. But, for the interviewee, it was crucial that the appropriate process be followed and that process involved having the decision be discussed by the entire board during its official meeting. Also, as Milburn, Kenefick, and Lambert (2005) highlight, the meeting itself may be subject to discursive negotiation on the part of participants. Meetings are communication events (Schwartman, 1989; Tracy & Dimock, 2004) whose meaning will of course vary from group to group. However, for boards, whether within the full board or committees of the board, meetings are intended to be the sites for significant decision-making. Because of this, board meetings warrant closer scrutiny to understand the communication micro-practices of how decisions are carried out.
Conclusion

Nonprofit board meetings are significant communication sites for analyzing the discursive negotiation of decision-making and organizational identity. This statement is intended to connect all of the strands developed within this position paper. Nonprofit boards face several communication dilemmas related to the contradictions inherent in the roles of board members (i.e., temporary voluntary leaders) and the ambiguity associated with how to carry out their responsibilities. The socialization and assimilation of board members is crucial in helping to education board members and reduce some potential ambiguity. Board meetings are an important communication site for understanding the processes of nonprofit boards and how they construct decisions and the organization itself.

References


