Shifting the Conversation: Generative Thinking in the Boardroom

AOHC Conference 2016: Shifting the Conversation

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Presenter Disclosure

**Presenter:** Gwen DuBois-Wing

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Objectives for this Session

- Highlight findings from my 2016 research which explored what Board Chairs & CEOs/EDs perceive create and sustain a generative mode in the boardroom.

- Identify how to optimize generative thinking in the boardroom.

- Explore practical approaches to implement the generative mode in your board and senior leadership dialogue, deliberations and decision making.
Research question: What do Board Chairs and CEOs perceive as factors that create and sustain a generative mode of governance in a boardroom?

Qualitative, descriptive research.

Built on work of Governance as Leadership (Chait, Ryan & Taylor, 2005) and Trower (2013).
The Board Chairs and CEO/EDs for this study were individuals who:

- Led a healthcare board located within Ontario;
- Demonstrated constructive stakeholder relationships and/or are working to actively engage with their internal and external community;
- Maintained a constructive Board/CEO relationship as assessed by key governance leaders, experts or consultants;
- Provided leadership to a board that demonstrates leading governance practices;
- Provided leadership to a board identified as being stable to higher performing, as assessed by key governance leaders, experts or consultants.
15 Board Chairs and 15 CEOs/EDs
30 interviews
- 9 hospital Board Chairs and CEOs
- 4 CHC Board Chairs and CEOs/EDs
- 2 CCAC Board Chairs and CEOs
Governance as Leadership: Modes

(Chait, Ryan & Taylor, 2005)
What the Generative Mode is Not...

- Micro-managing.
- Meddling.
- Questioning every issue or recommendation.
- Procrastinating.
- Indecision.
- Shifting inquiry to an extreme, unproductive level.

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Findings

Creating & Sustaining a Generative Mode in the Boardroom
Dealing with Tough Issues

- Harm reduction; safe injection sites
- Mergers with/taking on other organizations
- Integration
- Back office integration
- Capital planning; redevelopment; facilities planning
- Electronic health record
- Sustainability – funding, etc.
- Assisted suicide
- System leadership on some projects:
  - Health Links
  - Assisting with system challenges
  - Thinking of issues with a new lens – “What’s possible?”

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Generative Mode in the Boardroom: Enabling Factors

- Leadership
- Board/CEO Relationship
- Culture of Inquiry
- Expertise/Skills
- Board Engagement
- Context

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Leadership: A Focus on the Broader Health System

- Commitment to excellence.
- “Best board I have been on.”
- Healthcare governance:
  - View through Complex Adaptive System lens.
  - Challenge of understanding healthcare system.
  - Focus on broader healthcare system.
  - Being part of solution.

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Complex adaptive systems perspective:

- What is our piece in the puzzle of person/client/patient centredness?
- How can we make a difference?
- How can we contribute to making the system better?
- How can we be the “best” community hospital – in North America – and beyond?
- How do we be the “best” academic health sciences centre in North America – and beyond?
- How do we ensure we push the envelope – well beyond average? Average isn’t acceptable.
Leadership: A Focus on the Broader Health System

- “As a CEO, I want to be challenged...You need to push me...My Board Chair and I are very aligned about this.”

- “We know we can be part of the solution.” (Board Chair)

- “We are often approached, by the Ministry and others, to be part of the solution. We see this as our responsibility. How do we keep up with this? We challenge ourselves – are we up for this? And yes, this may be a stretch – and we are up to this!” (ED)

- “We have a lot of bright minds around our table. They have lived experiences. They’ve dealt with complex issues. They want to have their skills used.” (Board Chair)

- “Our board members and senior team – they want to make a difference. It matters for many future generations.” (Board Chair)
### CHAIR/CEO RELATIONSHIP
- Trust ★
- Respect ★
- Support
- Critical to board success ★
- Healthy relationship/healthy boundaries
- Constructive challenge

### BOARD/CEO RELATIONSHIP
- Trust ★
- Respect ★
- Rapport
- Support
- CEOs/EDs want to be challenged ★
- Balanced relationship
- Implications of poor relationship
“...and they’re a group, they’re a collective, they don’t see themselves as individuals. They really see where we’re going to be...we’re a collective making the best decisions we can as a group without getting into group think or micromanagement.”

~ CHC ED
Culture of Inquiry: The Art of Inquiry
“Good strategic thinking and decision making often require a shift in perspective — particularly in environments characterized by significant uncertainty and change. What worked in the past simply may not apply in the future. Asking “what if” questions about the future may create discomfort, since answers are often not obvious. But asking such questions also forces you to step back and challenge current assumptions that prevent you from seeing breakthrough solutions.”

~ Shoemaker & Krupp, 2015
*The Power of Asking Pivotal Questions*
“Leaders are often limited by selective perception and seek information that confirms what they wish to believe. Most don’t ask tough questions because they filter out weak signals that don’t fit their mental models.”

~ Shoemaker & Krupp, 2015

The Power of Asking Pivotal Questions
“Exceptional boards embrace the qualities of a continuous learning organization, evaluating their own performance and assessing the value that they add to the organization” (BoardSource, 2005, p. x).

- Various formats: retreats, provincial conferences, self-directed learning, governance sessions, etc.
- Storytelling (i.e. Client stories).
- Internal & external tours.
- External experts
Exploited various opportunities for learning (learning organization).

Dedicated resources for board development.

Board information:
- Reframing
- Clear, concise, informative.
Board Engagement: Meaningful & Productive

Board Participation
- Active participation
- Preparation
- Attendance

Use of Board Capital
- Intellectual
- Social
- Political
- Reputational

Board Engagement
- Internal
- External
- View of broader health system

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Expertise/Skills

- Purposeful, rigorous recruitment process
  - Use of skills matrix
  - Diversity.
- Effective orientation & onboarding.
- Context matters
  - Current needs of organization
  - Environmental realities.
Culture of Inquiry: Generative Mode in the Boardroom

- Focus on consequential issues.
- Comfort with ambiguity.
- Generative mode:
  - Sensemaking
  - Framing
  - Discerning
  - Learning.
- Generative conversations:
  - Engaged, robust dialogue
  - Deliberation
  - Constructive dissent
  - Encourage different viewpoints
  - Respectful challenge.

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Generative Thinking

Making it Happen in Your Boardroom
Different thinking: new ways of framing, making sense, learning.
- “Can’t draw lines in the sand.”

More engaged boards.

Greater board effectiveness.
“We must resist the urge to assume that task and structure are the sum total of governance. We can more easily do this if we shift our thinking from “What is governing?” to “Toward what ends are we governing?”

(Trower, 2013)
Creating a Boardroom Shift

- Set goals.
- Requires preparation and thinking prior to the meeting.
- Ensure the right amount and type of board information and data:
  - Highlights
  - Executive summaries
  - White papers
  - Dashboards
- Requires careful consideration and preparation by senior leadership.

- Engage in dialogue and debate:
  - Frame specific questions for discussion and/or that require consideration.
  - Stage a debate: 1/3 make case for; 1/3 make case against; 1/3 listen – and reflect what they learned.

(Trower, 2014; DuBois-Wing, 2016)
Creating a Boardroom Shift

- Allocate time for deliberations, separate from decisions.
  - Develop annual work plan for generative discussions.
  - Seize opportunities for ‘just in time’ generative discussions.
  - Highlight generative opportunities during routine fiduciary and strategic discussions.

- Use small groups to take deep dives on consequential issues (i.e. work groups, ad hoc committees, etc.).

- Distribute leadership.
  - Invite various board members to lead discussions, etc.
  - Rotate board members who summarize each month’s meeting highlights.
  - Position various board members to be ‘devil’s advocate’.

(Trower, 2014; DuBois-Wing, 2016)
Creating a Boardroom Shift

Additional Strategies & Thoughts
What one step can you take to promote a culture of inquiry in your boardroom?
- Individually?
- Collectively?
Final Reflections...

Based on your experience:

- What has exemplified – or come closest to a culture of inquiry within your boardroom?
- What did that look like?
- Who were the key players involved?
- What helped?
- What could be done differently?
References


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