

"THE PERILS AND POTENTIAL OF YMCA GOVERNANCE"

Frisson, Friction, Equilibrium and Momentum.

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A Story

Several years ago the Board of YMCA Victoria undertook a review. They came to the realisation that their skills could no longer deliver on their collective desire to strengthen the Y; to have a positive impact on the lives of even more people.

For the love of the YMCA and all the Y stands for; things had to change.

At the conclusion of a two-day retreat the decision was unanimous. YMCA Victoria would embark on a Board recruitment journey like no other in our history. .

At the conclusion each board member would resign and substitute themselves with a more suitably skilled person.

The frisson in the room was palpable.

We were excited, we felt full of possibility and hope. We were onto something good. After nine months a reinvigorated Board was inducted.

Along with two of the experienced Board members, who had been convinced to stay on for a further three years as the keepers of the YMCA collective memory; the new Board members partnered with staff and set a strategic course **of diversification and mission alignment...**

Three years later, YMCA Victoria's revenue had doubled. We were 'on a roll', we had had momentum... and therein lies the potential in great governance!

Introduction

Colleagues it is a pleasure to speak to you today. I am sorry I could not be with you in person. Listening in for the past hour, from this distance it sounds like it has been an exceptional week so far.

I'm delighted to have been asked by Steve and the organizing team to explore today's theme.

When our Board 'sacked itself' it was certainly a radical and different way of thinking.

Selflessly and for the betterment of the YMCA each person set aside their personal wants and needs and thought only of the best thing for the Y; and it was electric, energising – the potential of a local Y board had been unleashed.

The potential of great governance is that it sets us on the path to greater mission impact.

On the other hands when **not at its best** the Board/staff relationship is 'felt' first; and witnessed later. Sometimes, most often when we experience a crisis, **friction** is sparked. Friction which if left untended that can destroy even the most robust of Ys.

When we operate in **balance or equilibrium** we are working sub optimally it feels comfortable - cruisy; organised! That can be a real problem.

I contend that to be at our governance best we need to work at the edge of our competence.

Before I go on, let me provide you with some context for YMCA Board Member responsibilities in Australia.

Good Governance Principles

In Australia good governance is prescribed by law.

The pre-eminent trainer of Company Directors (i.e. Board members) is the Australian Institute of Company Directors.

The governance responsibilities of YMCA Board Members in Australia are no different to commercial company directors, even though each is a volunteer.

I recognize they the responsibilities may be similar in your country, but have learned over my years not to assume so. In Australia:

- **Knowledge of the YMCA is assumed by law** once the person joins the Board. Appropriate **on-boarding** is imperative. Naivety on a Board is not acceptable.
- **Boards cannot function like Parliaments** – once elected to the Board an individual cannot represent a **particular constituency**. Each Board member must act in the interests of the whole organization.
- The prime Board responsibilities are:
 - Set clear roles and responsibilities;
 - set strategy;
 - oversee risk;
 - monitor performance;
 - ensure board effectiveness;
 - ensure integrity and accountability;
 - build the organization;
 - ensure appropriate culture and ethics; *and*
 - ensure stakeholder engagement.

One of the perils of good governance in our country is risk aversion.

The training offered by the Australian Institute of Company Directors emphasises risk and compliance above other responsibilities. **It emphasises the legal responsibilities of the Board and sets aside mission achievement.**

At its core Australian Institute of Company Directors promotes **managerialism, responsibility and “business as usual”**.

This is a massive **governance challenge for NGOs**, like the Y, that are mission driven, out to change the world for good.

It is a **huge challenge to innovation** too. In my experience it takes extraordinary effort from staff to ignite the flame of change. Sometimes it takes friction to move beyond equilibrium.

A story of collaboration

Some examples you might talk to my Australian colleagues about this afternoon include establishing joint venture companies between YMCAs.

A tremendous example of one is the “New Schools” project with Whittlesea (Glyn) and Geelong YMCAs, in which we have partnered with a private consortium to operate community infrastructure in new suburbs, collocated school properties.

Another, more tentative foray is in place with Brisbane YMCA (Alan) teaching children to swim under the “Kingswim” banner.

And we are just starting to investigate integrated procurement on a national scale in collaboration with YMCA New South Wales.

It takes a spark to light the fire that frees up our thinking!

This afternoon I will share three themes. My perspective on how we have thought differently to get different and better results; to build momentum. I will talk about relationships, change and the importance of YMCA as a Social Movement.

Relationships – two people are key

As I'm sure Michael Weil mentioned this morning Sonnenberg'sⁱⁱ thesis on exemplary boards is a powerful reminder to us all.

"What distinguishes exemplary boards is that they are robust, effective social systems."

At the centre is the relationship between the Chief Staff Officer (CSO) & Chief Volunteer Officer (CVO). It is this relationship, more than any other, which is pivotal in the success of a YMCA.

I've never seen a YMCA thrive without a great CVO/CSO relationship.

A good Chief Staff Officer/CEO/General Secretary can lead a good YMCA, but only a great relationship between the Chief Staff Officer and the Chief Volunteer Officer can **form the foundation of a truly great YMCA.**

A story

To me a great CSO and CVO relationship is a little like the porridge in the Goldilocks story for childrenⁱⁱⁱ:

- If the relationship between the CVO and the CSO is too hot (close) there is a danger of one becoming the follower of the other.
- If it is too distant (cold), the relationship can become dysfunctional, damaging to the Y.
- When the 'relationship porridge' is just right, and we have balance the perfect working environment for creativity and agility is in play; this builds trust – the most perfect ingredient for creating frisson, excitement and possibilities.

I have worked with many CVOs, or Chairs as we call them. The common thread for the Y working at our best has been trust in each other, regular and timely contact, collegiality, candidness and professional respect. When any of these has been absent, I have accepted the responsibility and challenge of building them. Without them the Y is diminished. Without them each of us is diminished.

Two reasons to change.

As Chief Staff Officers, it is our role, in partnership with our Chief Volunteer Officer to temporarily guide change, to improve the impact of our YMCA and ensure its sustainability. Each of us is merely a custodian for the Y at a point in time.

Two things drive meaningful change - a compelling vision, or a crisis.

The pursuit of a compelling vision is more enjoyable, innovative and energising than a response to a crisis. Nevertheless when crisis drives change, each of must endure the pain, even trauma and ensure that the Y emerges better, brighter and more impactful than before.

Change driven by a Compelling Vision = Growth

A story of vision

The first is where we created and pursued our Vision for 2020.

The Vision was co-created at an event with the direct involvement of more than 10% of the staff and volunteer workforce, and a representative sample of stakeholders.

600 people in a room underpinned a momentum for change like nothing before.

Vision 2020 has proven compelling.

It galvanised staff and volunteers to strive hard, innovate and relentlessly pursue our vision. It attracted new governors of the highest calibre like moths to a flame. It propelled on a trajectory of growth and renewal.

We externally review our Board every two years. In our most recent external Board Performance Review the consultant^{iv} said of the YMCA Victoria Board, *"the 19 directors and executives interviewed at YMCA Victoria are totally engaged and more importantly – everyone interviewed clearly understood how the values, goals and aspirations of the Y were totally aligned with their reason for participating in the YMCA."*

When asked by the consultant about limiting factors to 'you being your best'; *"Interviewees tended to mention self rather than people or processes as limiting factors. Took responsibility. No blame laying. The culture of the Y is unusual. There appears to be a high level of trust, coherence and cohesion."*

I adhere to the old saying, "In time of peace prepare for war." So it was at this point we asked ourselves; "is there too much alignment? Too much equilibrium? Hubris even?"

To ensure we kept sharp, we set ourselves a challenge to change. During the past 12 months, we have recruited five new board members, shuffled management portfolios and are realigning our strategic horizon toward 2030.

We have enjoyed frisson, endured friction and upset the equilibrium! Change with purpose, with direction keeps us on our toes. Dynamic. Interdependent. Accountable to each other!

Change driven by Crisis = Inertia

For decades Australian YMCA Boards have typically adopted a "Stewardship Governance Model." They have been hands off, focused on foresight & oversight. However a crisis shook our Movement to the core a couple of years ago, and things changed forever, and ultimately for good.

Many of you would know of the challenges faced by the Australian YMCA Movement as a consequence of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse conducted in Australia.

The **hurt and pain** of the victims and survivors of sexual abuse while in the care of the YMCA can never be taken back. As a Movement we have committed to righting the **wrongs of the past, and preventing future aberrations.**

Our involvement in the Royal Commission has permanently changed the Australian YMCA Movement.

At no other time in our history has the **mutual interdependence** of Australian YMCAs being so evident.

The YMCA in Australia has traversed the deepest of institutional crises and is emerging, albeit in the shadow of trauma, better for the experience.

We are undisputedly now the pre-eminent 'child-safe' organization in Australia, and are proud to be.

Seemingly not dissimilar to the Canadian YMCAs' "Accelerating Y Amalgamations" (AYA); although motivated by differing drivers; the Australian YMCAs' Fit for Purpose Project is yielding unprecedented collaboration between Associations and YMCA Australia; staff and Board members.

A story of belief

Beginning as a formal motion at a National AGM, born of frustration, what was to become known as the Fit for Purpose Project, has seen the Australian Movement galvanise to emerge from the shadow of the Royal Commission.

With wise counsel and stoic leadership we have moved beyond structural debate and are on the verge of reclaiming our status and pride as a Social Movement, united through our belief, our localisation of the YMCAs global cause "empowering young people".

"We believe in the power of inspired young people," has become a *rally cry* with which each of our YMCAs have affiliated, and reintroduced ourselves as the revitalised, relevant social movement enabling happier and healthier lives that we know ourselves to be.

The governance leadership of our movement over the past two years (both volunteer and staff) has been breathtaking.

A pivotal decision to define our core belief provided us with the opportunity to participate in a process of alignment and directionality. To identify and highlight our commonalities, and said differences to one side.

It has taken years, but collectively we have turned crisis around. Created a unifying belief; the foundation for a unified vision.

Which brings me to my final theme.

The YMCA is a Social Movement, it's tough but worth it.

The YMCA Movement is unique; we are one, and we are many. "Globally to our core and from our foundation^v we are a Social Movement."

A new generation of Y people are beginning to understand that we are not an organisation, nor are we a multinational company.

Therein lies our beauty, elegance our unmitigated potential for social impact.

We are on the threshold of harnessing managerial practices for our betterment, not succumbing to them.

More than a social movement, I say we are a redemptive social movement.

We aim to change the life of every person with whom we engage for the better.

Our global change model for empowering young people, elegant in its simplicity, guides each of us as a space-maker dedicated to enabling the transformation of people, particularly young people, so that each experiences a positive impact on their life and the lives of those around them.

It's because we are a Social Movement dedicated to that most worthy of causes, **empowering young people**, that we choose to organise ourselves around a **universal mission, and interpret it locally**.

It means we stay relevant, it means we stay true, it means we serve local people; it means we are innovative and remain young at heart.

Closing

Colleagues, our very own World Urban Network is a powerful expression of the power of how important diversity, inspiration and challenge is in fostering each of us to be the very best leader that we can be.

The World Urban Network, in so many ways, celebrates open governance of the Movement and the diverse interpretation of our mission locally.

We are ourselves a social ecosystem, operating in a climate of respect, trust, and candour.

We are a micro experiment exploring "The Perils and Potential of YMCA Governance".

In this conference which we have likely **witnessed or felt Frisson, Friction, Equilibrium and Momentum** and so learned new things.

The World Urban Network is a forum in which the *human element transcends structure*, in so many ways we are as Sonnenberg^{vi} says a "robust, effective social system."

Fellowship by any other name rules.....

Thank you

REFERENCES

ⁱ Definitions (Merriam-Webster)

- Frisson - "a brief moment of emotional excitement" – in a YMCA, it's that moment we know where having creative, active conversations and it feels like we are onto something good.
- Friction – "the clashing between two persons or parties of opposed views" – in a YMCA board, it's that moment where the conversation feels uncomfortable, perhaps gets personal. Managed correctly it can spark frisson, managed incorrectly it can ignite a devastating fire.
- Equilibrium – "a state of intellectual or emotional balance" – in a YMCA board, it's where things are "humming along smoothly, easily." This is the time to ask, "is it time to change?"
- Momentum – "strength or force gained by motion or by a series of events" – in a YMCA board, it's where things are headed in the direction we intend, we witness amplification of our impact.

ⁱⁱ HBR – What Makes Great Boards Great - <https://hbr.org/2002/09/what-makes-great-boards-great>

ⁱⁱⁱ [The Story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears](#)

Once upon a time, there was a little girl named Goldilocks. She went for a walk in the forest. Pretty soon, she came upon a house. She knocked and, when no one answered, she walked right in.

At the table in the kitchen, there were three bowls of porridge. Goldilocks was hungry. She tasted the porridge from the first bowl.

"This porridge is too hot!" she exclaimed.

So, she tasted the porridge from the second bowl.

"This porridge is too cold," she said

So, she tasted the last bowl of porridge.

"Ahhh, this porridge is just right," she said happily and she ate it all up.

After she'd eaten the three bears' breakfasts she decided she was feeling a little tired. So, she walked into the living room where she saw three chairs. Goldilocks sat in the first chair to rest her feet.

"This chair is too big!" she exclaimed.

So she sat in the second chair.

"This chair is too big, too!" she whined.

So she tried the last and smallest chair.

"Ahhh, this chair is just right," she sighed. But just as she settled down into the chair to rest, it broke into pieces!

Goldilocks was very tired by this time, so she went upstairs to the bedroom. She lay down in the first bed, but it was too hard. Then she lay in the second bed, but it was too soft. Then she lay down in the third bed and it was just right. Goldilocks fell asleep.

As she was sleeping, the three bears came home.

"Someone's been eating my porridge," growled the Papa bear.

"Someone's been eating my porridge," said the Mama bear.

"Someone's been eating my porridge and they ate it all up!" cried the Baby bear.

"Someone's been sitting in my chair," growled the Papa bear.

"Someone's been sitting in my chair," said the Mama bear.

"Someone's been sitting in my chair and they've broken it all to pieces," cried the Baby bear.

They decided to look around some more and when they got upstairs to the bedroom,

Papa bear growled, "Someone's been sleeping in my bed,"

"Someone's been sleeping in my bed, too" said the Mama bear

"Someone's been sleeping in my bed and she's still there!" exclaimed Baby bear.

Just then, Goldilocks woke up and saw the three bears. She screamed, "Help!" And she jumped up and ran out of the room. Goldilocks ran down the stairs, opened the door, and ran away into the forest. And she never returned to the home of the three bears.

^{iv} Board Accord - <http://www.boardaccord.com.au/>

^v World YMCA - <http://www.ymca.int/who-we-are/mission/>

^{vi} HBR – What Makes Great Boards Great - <https://hbr.org/2002/09/what-makes-great-boards-great>