TORONTO NEIGHBOURHOOD CENTRES

How Governance Can Support People-Centred Civic Engagement in Community Agencies

Insights from Parkdale Activity- Recreation Centre (PARC)

Toronto Neighbourhood Centres' Community Voices for System Change initiative brings TNC's member agencies together to explore how they can better incorporate people-centred civic engagement into their work at all levels. As part of the initiative's two-year mandate, TNC is working with agencies, resident groups, and community organizers to produce a series of community profiles that highlight people-centred projects and activities unfolding across the city, as well as the resources and relationships that make this work possible. With concrete recommendations for frontline workers and senior management, these profiles are intended to serve as resources for community-serving agencies that are looking to incorporate people-centred practices into their work and planning.

Introduction

The Parkdale Activity-Recreation Centre (PARC) is a community-based social-service support organization located in Parkdale that strives to be a community where people rebuild their lives. The idea of PARC was born in 1977 when a group of volunteers observed the large number of adults living in Parkdale rooming houses and boarding homes. Many were survivors of the psychiatric system, had little money, few family contacts and no real place to go and connect with peers.[1] Today, PARC works with members on individual issues of poverty, mental health, addictions, homelessness and food security through the provision of supportive housing, food, individualized support (also known as intensive case management), employment support, and social-recreational activities that reduce isolation. Since 2019, PARC has also been a significant Parkdale landlord and property holder, and is now responsible for over 120 units of affordable housing.

This case study looks at how the governance structure of Parkdale Activity-Recreation Centre (PARC) supports people-centred civic engagement and provides insights for the Toronto Neighbourhood Centre's Community Voices for Systems Change (CVSC) initiative in equipping its member agencies to integrate PCCE into their organizations.

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[1]   For more information, see PARC's Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/pg/PARCtoronto/about/

Defining People-Centred Civic Engagement

The Toronto Neighbourhood Centres' Civic Engagement Affinity Group has created a common definition of people-centred civic engagement (PCCE), which informs this case study.

As per this definition, PCCE is an approach to working with communities that consciously privileges perspectives drawn from the lived or living experiences of community members. Community members are seen as co-pilots in working towards social change, as well as individuals who have the right to access community services that are organized around their rights, holistic needs, and expectations.

PCCE works toward a larger vision of social justice and community change that addresses the power imbalances within our sector, organizations, and communities that deny people's ability to work together to meet local and systemic challenges. It also enables organizations to work differently with the people they serve, and to respond to the needs of communities by integrating services, capacity-building, and social reform.

Amplifying and supporting PCCE requires that agencies commit to working collectively with communities, grassroots groups, and other organizations to ensure that appropriate structures, procedures, and practices are in place. Ultimately, this approach aspires to remove barriers and enable people to have more control over their lives through civic engagement.

What We Mean by Governance

Governance refers to how a group organizes to make decisions. Its Latin etymology, *gubernare*, meaning to steer or to pilot or its Greek roots, *kybernan*, borrowing from nautical lingo, meaning to steer or pilot a ship or direct as a pilot, are helpful in making clear the task at hand, namely, directing or guiding something and entailing tasks such as setting a destination, charting a path, following a course or map to reach its landing spot, and then actually arriving at the target. In the social-service sector, this translates into "a framework of responsibilities, requirements and accountabilities within which organizations operate, including regulatory, audit and reporting requirements, and relationships with key stakeholders."[2]

For non-profit community agencies, the task of governance is generally located in the board of directors, the body that has legal responsibility for the actions of the agency and acts as "the custodian" of its mission.[3] A board of directors, given its primary roles of representing the organization as its legal voice and representing the public or membership interests in the organization[4], plays a key role in shaping "the determination of the values, strategy, policies, and practices adopted by the non-profit organization;"[5] in short, the board determines how an organization will achieve its mission and assumes accountability for this mission. While a board may, and generally does, delegate work to staff and/or committees related to its policies, programs and services, the outcomes of an organization are the responsibility of the board of directors.

A board of directors is typically elected by and accountable to its membership. They exist in different forms: A policy board focuses on "strategy, fiscal responsibility, and providing oversight to managers of the non-profit organization;"[6] a working board is "directly involved in the day-to-day operations of a non-profit organization;" and a mixed board "combines the characteristics of both working and policy boards."[7] In all forms, a board of directors sets in place policies, procedures, values and long-term planning and thus steers the organization towards achieving its mission.

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2   "Reimagining Governance." Ontario Nonprofit Network. https://theonn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/RG-Strategic-Framework-Overview-FINAL.pdf

3   Akingbola, Kunle et al. Change Management in Nonprofit Organizations: Theory and Practice. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. p. 151

4   Bryce, Herrington J. "Nonprofit Board Responsibilities: The Basics." Nonprofit Quarterly, Summer 2017. https://nonprofitquarterly.org/nonprofit-board-governance-responsibilities-basic-guide/

5   Akingbola, Kunle et. Change Management, p. 151

6   Akingbola, Kunle, et. al. Change Management. p.154

7   Ibid. 155

A board of directors thus plays a critical role in shaping the "destination" or outcomes or accomplishments of an organization by charting its course through decisions on policies, values, financial resources and other key matters and following along to ensure it stays the course. As such, the board of directors can therefore play a strong role in how a community agency can support the integration of PCCE into its planning process and its decision-making.

How it Works: People-Centred Civic Engagement in Governance

A key component of integrating PCCE into the culture of a non-profit agency is the integration of people-centred practices into its governance. PARC offers a great example of the various ways this can be accomplished, from mandating the inclusion of members[8] on the board to creating mechanisms for members to shape decisions at the board level.

Mandating inclusion of members in the board of directors. PARC's governance model consists of its board of directors and its committee structure. The board of directors, which is a policy board, comprises fourteen members, plus the ED ex officio. Half of those members are Member Directors—i.e. people with lived or living experience of poverty, mental health issues, or homelessness who utilize PARC's services and programs—while the other half are Community Directors. The membership of Member Directors is mandated by PARC's by-laws.

All applicants for Member Director positions must be screened by the Nominations Subcommittee to determine eligibility for candidacy. Prior experience on a board or graduation from a PARC leadership program or equivalent experience is a prerequisite, though the leadership equivalent need not be program-based. PARC's by-laws provide for elections for Member Directors when the number of candidates exceeds the number of vacancies.

PARC's governance model also includes a committee structure that is responsible for making recommendations to the board on a number of key organizational issues. There are currently five[9] working committees—advocacy, finance, fundraising, governance, and human resources— and each Member Director sits on at least one committee. Each of these committees can also have subcommittees. Member Directors also hold a caucus every month before the board meeting.

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8   Tenants of PARC's housing services are considered members by virtue of their tenancy. All others who access services are deemed members by virtue of their participation in, or receipt of, services offered by PARC.

9   As of May 2021, the board of directors was working to create a sixth committee for anti-racism.

Committees are required to have a minimum number of directors, usually with a double minimum/ratio regarding the two classes of directors. The ED is also usually a member of a committee, but may or may not be a voting member. Some committees may consider one additional member of staff at the managerial level to be a member —e.g., the Finance Director and the ED are both members of the finance committee as per the committee's terms of reference—but committees can also invite community and member volunteers to join them. Most committees even allow volunteers to chair the group.

All committee members have equal voting power as a general rule, but exceptions can be made by class of member or the subject matter being put to vote. Further, a minimum number of directors of both director classes must be present for quorum. Subcommittees have the same parameters as committees.

Committees hold a high degree of power because they play a key role in decision-making. Most work related to organizational strategy is done at committees with each committee taking its recommendations to the board, which has the final say in all decisions. For example, the finance committee will examine in detail matters pertaining to its work—such as deciding on the lending authority for purchasing real estate—and then make recommendations to the board of directors, which will approve financial decisions. So the board and its committees craft the organization's strategy, while the ED and staff execute that strategy at the tactical level and report back on the results.

1. Proactively creating space for members to take part in decision-making.

In addition to participating in board meetings, PARC's Member Directors hold a monthly meeting where they can inform each other about committee work and

prepare to make informed decisions at the board meetings. Moreover, this caucus structure provides Member Directors with a safe space where they can voice their concerns as well as the concerns of other members who are not on the board.

In terms of the work of the board, there is no formal channel per se for members to have a say, though with the presence of Member Directors an informal channel does exist. (Members can ask to speak directly with the board, but these requests are usually mediated by the caucus meetings.) This is also true for agency operations—there is no actual structure for members to share operational concerns, but in practice, members can approach Member Directors directly or indirectly. The monthly caucus meeting then serves as a space where the Member Directors can decide how they are going to respond and if they will bring the issue to the attention of the Executive Director (which is often the case). "You flag one of us down," says Member Director Peter Martin. The start of the process is informal. Once it's brought to caucus's attention, it starts to formalize." This is the preferred method for relaying member feedback because caucus mediation helps weed out frivolous requests. Any request that reaches the board via caucus has the implicit or explicit endorsement of Member Directors.

Once a month, a representative from the Member Directors' caucus meets with the Executive Director informally to share the concerns that have been brought up. This meeting serves as a clearinghouse for member concerns. No minutes are kept at this meeting in order to encourage candor, but any decisions made are reported back to caucus and recorded in the caucus minutes that are shared with the board every month. (If caucus needs to go in camera, minutes from those sessions will be available only to caucus members.)

Martin says that Member Directors "can definitely tell [the Executive Director] what the problems are from where we see them. "He's hostage to his information gathering. He will often hear about procedural issues from management, which means he's only getting the staff or management point of view." Having Member Directors on the board provides the ED with the member point of view so as to balance the information he receives from staff and managers. This means the decision-making environment within the board is more grounded in reality than it would be otherwise, resulting in better decision-making.

2. Creating accountability mechanisms.

At the board level, Member Directors can ask questions about the Executive Director's report, thereby acting as an important accountability mechanism on behalf of members. "Because we [Member Directors] get to see the results of some of these things we can challenge the report in a way the Community Director can't," says Martin. "If you're a Community Director, you've got to take what the ED says on faith. You've got nothing to gauge it against, generally speaking. That's another important role we [Member Directors] have – whether that role takes place inside the head of [the ED] before he writes or ...while he's presenting – it doesn't matter – those are both methods that a member's lived experience informs governance."

3. Inclusion of member perspectives and priorities.

Member Directors inform conversations at the board level and this is one way to support and include the priorities of members. As a result, Member Directors are able to advocate for certain member priorities, like camp, PARC's annual holiday for members.[10]

"Camp is the single most important thing for members," says Martin. It's the only time to get out of the city for a holiday. If you're a Community Director who has a cottage that you go to on the weekend and you go away on a vacation twice a year to nice countries, then camp may not seem so important." Without Member Directors, community board members run the risk of overlooking member priorities owing to different worldviews rooted in socioeconomic and cultural factors and status. With the presence of Member Directors on the board, the importance of camp can be integrated into the board's agenda and decision-making.

In recent years, the board has also added a new duty for Community Directors to facilitate their integration into the PARC members community: They are expected to either participate in one of PARC's social activities (like knitting, creative writing, or games night) or attend camp.

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10   The annual event, which also includes some staff members, usually runs for three nights and four days. Members have access to activities like hiking and fishing, and the event is fully catered. All members can apply for camp, but the event tends to be overbooked, so PARC has put in place a lottery system to determine who will attend. Traditionally, the ED joins the campers for the last full day and stays overnight.

4. Inclusion of a Member-at-Large within the board of directors.

The board appoints this Member Director, an officer under PARC's by-laws, though the Member Directors typically choose this representative (as well as the Member Director Co-Chair) from among themselves in caucus.[11] The Member-at-Large at PARC has a heightened responsibility to listen to members. Ideally, this person is at PARC every day and available to members who want to discuss ideas or concerns.

Enabling Elements and Architecture

Various elements of PARC's infrastructure—including values, organizational culture, and supports for members—help foster its practices of people-centred civic engagement.

Commitment to resident empowerment. The ethos of PARC is apparent in its statement about membership: "The simple act of walking through our doors is what makes a person a PARC member." The agency sees itself as "a place where meals do more than fill mouths. They start relationships that build trust and fight poverty and mental health stigma." PARC also states explicitly that it is "predicated on, and celebrates, psychiatric consumer/survivor participation in all levels of the organization."[12]

PARC is a space for community, for services, and for community-building among members. To illustrate, PARC has a drop-in that allows members to connect with other members, take part in programs, access essential needs (like showers, clothing, emergency food support, daily meals, and internet access), and take part in training sessions, social outings, and other activities. Another example of how PARC works

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11   Traditionally, the three parochial officers (the member-at-large and the two Co-Chairs) are selected by the respective grouping, Member Directors or Community Directors. The board as a whole then confirms these choices at the first meeting after the AGM when all the officer positions are decided.

12   See PARC's Facebook page.

with members is its "Knowledge is Power" program, which it offers in partnership with George Brown College. This program looks at hierarchies of power and normative power structures and enables participants to dismantle the language and structures of oppression.

A willingness to share power and foster member involvement. While PARC's by-laws do require that half its board be comprised of members of the community who access its services, it's not this structural requirement itself that supports PCCE, but rather the **actual practices** within this structure. Those practices include ceding power, fostering member involvement, and including members' voices in decision-making.

The words of Member Director, Peter Martin, are instructive here to give shape to this analysis:

> Changing the structure of governance will not change anything if you don't actually cede power. You actually have to cede power to membership to actually give membership power. The whole thing is about attitude – attitudes are far more important than structural substance because you don't need to change your by-laws to have mandated member directorships. You can go out right now with your current by-laws and invite members to become directors. It's real power.

In Martin's view, the essence of how governance can support community voices and people-centred civic engagement is attitude. "It's not how you speak, but how you relate," he says. "It's whether you listen, and whether you're dismissive or supportive or capable of accommodating changes as a result of a conversation. These aren't things you can put on a piece of paper." (A structure and actual mechanisms are necessary, too, of course, to go hand in hand with this attitude.)

"A lot of the people who come here have learned to be passive," adds Martin. "It's a way of surviving in this world." He goes on to add that it's one of the reasons PARC is "very mindful of giving people the space to feel they have a voice and to use that voice in a context where it will actually be heard." Agencies must understand that integrating PCCE into their work means making sure that people feel their voices are heard and that their voices result in real change. This is also a fundamental part of the task when it comes to steering or piloting a community agency because the organization's destination, ultimately, must be the empowerment of the people it serves.

Putting supports in place for members to be active board members. There is an ongoing effort to recruit members at PARC, with Member Directors actively keeping an eye out for members who could be candidates for the board. Members also receive support as they go through the three-step process to becoming a Member Director. First, candidates go through a screening process to ensure that they are policy compliant (i.e. they accept the organization's general principles of fairness and equity). This is followed by a training session during the election process to support their participation in the election. Finally, upon election, Member Directors take part in an education process to learn about the history of PARC, its policies and guidelines, and possible conflicts of interest.

Some Member Directors have issues with literacy and learning, so PARC has put in place supports that can provide an appropriate learning process and environment. "We're trying to make it so that when people get on the board, they are able to actually do things and feel they have the tools to do things," says Martin. "It can be awful if you get there and feel you are not being listened to. That can reinforce some terrible traumas."

One innovation is that the organization now has a formal mentorship program that pairs new directors with current directors. And the formal caucus provides a positive and supportive space where Member Directors can be honest about a lack of comprehension. Martin says that Member Directors also spend a lot of time outside formal meetings helping each other with things like using the board's software program for record keeping and calendar services. "If you're a member who has made it on to the board, you are generally mindful already of providing support to other members," says Martin. "You're also in the habit of practising healthy self-assessments, which are reinforced by your peers on the board. We look out for each other."

Challenges

PARC faces the following challenges when it comes to governance and PCCE:

1. Transitioning from a young, reactive activist organization into a mature proactive activist organization.

2. Transitioning from a service-focused organization to a hybrid service provider and landlord (either directly or as head tenant). Conflicts arise because PARC
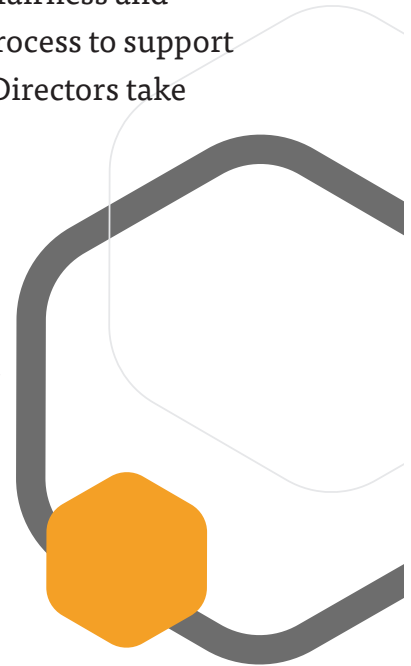
now has two constituencies that only partially overlap and sometimes can be in opposition to each other.

3. As the organization grows and becomes more complex, there is the inevitable pull in favour of a vertical power structure, and the consequent struggle between that pull and the counter-desire to maintain a horizontal organization.

One way the organization is addressing these challenges is by codifying its practices and values within a policy framework. PARC recognizes the distinction between governance policies and operational policies, as well as the hierarchy where the latter nest within the former. (In other words, the organizational policies are a response to the governance policies, mostly subordinate and responsive to them.) There is also the recognition that governance aspirations may founder upon organizational realities. Having both the ED and members on the board helps with this feedback loop.

Second, PARC accepts that even proactive organizations will have to respond to unanticipated realities. To stay agile, the organization is creating a governance culture that encodes annual review of policies and values into the culture and practice of the board. PARC's board culture values enquiry and constructive critiques.

Third, the board recognizes that representative diversity is a prerequisite for ensuring the widest relevant input into board decision-making, including the re-evaluation and creation of both policies and organizational mission and values. Diversity of input in turn requires a board culture that expects contributions from all, and consciously monitors unhealthy cultural norms that diminish and devalue non-normative or non-hegemonic individuals. For example, pink people in general, and pink men in particular, are consciously a minority on the board and its committees (which also include non-directors).

Likewise, because the board recognizes that PARC is a congeries of constituencies (including tenants who may have no interest in PARC services), it seeks to create subordinate organizational structures that can reinforce perhaps unconscious areas of solidarity between constituencies. One such example would be the annual camp, which is open to all members and provides a neutral space where members of different constituencies can meet and forge connections.

A similar strategy encourages horizontal power structures. By creating governance and managerial bodies with participants who have different levels of power within

the organization—but equal access to power in that body's functioning —PARC seeks to put into practice its values of equal dignity, worth, and contribution from all the people who collectively form the PARC community.

All of the considerations above also form part of the regular discourse of the board of directors. "We are constantly reminding ourselves of what we are doing and why we are doing it," says Member Director Peter Martin. "We take pride in our and PARC's achievements while acknowledging that there is usually an opportunity to improve what we are doing."

Summary

Incorporating member involvement and feedback into non-profit governance is an important avenue for infusing people-centred civic engagement into agency culture. This examination of PARC's governance structure shows that governance can support PCCE by:

- Putting structures into place within governance that support member participation in decision-making;

- Ensuring that members have channels through which to communicate issues about services, initiatives, and other activities;

- Enabling members to shape the board's decision-making in a meaningful way;

- Putting supports in place for members to become board members and supports for when they do; and

- Creating a space (whether through recreational activities or camp) for shared experiences between Community Directors and the membership as a whole.

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