

LEARNING LAB SPOTLIGHT:

Redefining the board's role with Findhelp 211

In 2021, the Reimagining Governance project embarked on collaborative, co-creative journeys with eight different nonprofit organizations in a series of "Learning Labs."

In the Learning Labs, board and staff members from each organization committed time and energy over the course of several months to engage in experimentation and dialogue, utilizing tools and resources created by Reimagining Governance. Each organization entered this work with their own unique circumstances and motivations, which shaped each of their journeys in distinct ways.

ORGANIZATION:

Findhelp 211

KEY DETAILS:

- Charitable, nonprofit agency providing information services across the province
- Networked organization connected to many organizations with a stake in their impact and governance across North America, including 211 partners, United Way, and many others
- 70+ staff, 7 board members



AT A GLANCE: THEIR BIG "AHA!" MOMENTS

- Recognized that the board is not the home of governance, which opened an opportunity to shift from a traditional board-centric model to a bolder, more agile, equitable, and broadly shared governance system.
- Learned that a more agile governance system can actually enhance and deepen stakeholder engagement.



VIDEO: [Transcript](#)

Sue Wilkinson (she/her) and Jessica Eden (she/her) from Findhelp 211 discuss their big "aha!" moments.



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It's important to break down the assumptions that we have about governance and the board, [and to] really understand...the true obligation of an organization to meet its legislative requirements, its fiduciary requirements – it's really foundational and arguably very liberating.

- Sue Wilkinson



THEIR JOURNEY

During the Learning Labs, each organization took a different journey depending on their motivations and unique circumstances. Teams followed the energy, and were guided by various resources, activities, and conversations.



MOTIVATIONS FOR REIMAGINING GOVERNANCE

- A desire to lift, elevate, and build governance muscles.
- A belief that as systems and the organization evolve, governance must also evolve.
- A goal to be more purpose-driven and pursue bold change.



VIDEO:

[Transcript](#)

Sue shares how the pandemic amplified Findhelp 211's desire to challenge some of the assumptions they were holding and take the journey of reimagining governance.



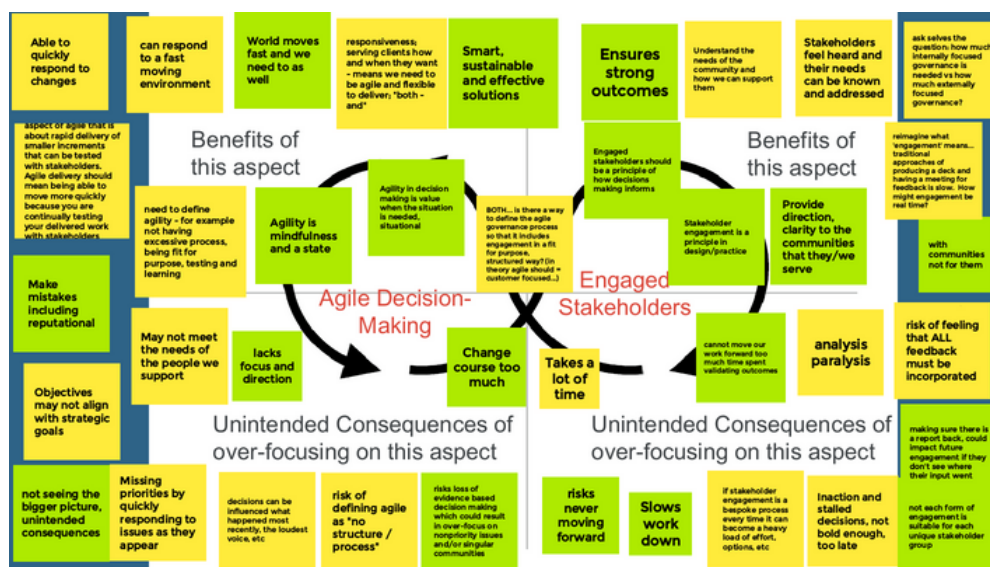
HOW THEY STARTED:

- Documented and explored the [unique organizational circumstances](#) that shape their governance as a way to uncover what's actually fixed and what's more fluid and open to innovation

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- Reflected upon the role of governance in their organization, and how broader trends and forces were impacting their governance design.
- Created a snapshot of their current governance culture and how it shaped governance work and decision-making in the organization.
- Engaged in a polarity-mapping exercise that helped them explore some creative tensions, such as the interplay between agile governance and stakeholder engagement.



[See a larger version of this polarity-mapping exercise and download your own blank template.](#)

- Accessed the Reimagining Governance resource [Board essentials](#), which describes the responsibilities the board must fulfill to meet legal and regulatory requirements. It's not all the board may do, but it's the essential ones that can't be shared or delegated.

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WHAT THEY LEARNED AND UNCOVERED

A team consisting of board members and the staff leadership team reviewed the work they did.

One of their big insights was that the role of governance for Findhelp 211 is to create the conditions that enable purpose and impact through excellence, culture, and agility. This insight uncovered a desire to think of the board as the "host" of governance rather than the "home" of governance.

This led them to identify their ultimate aspiration to have a governance system that is purpose-driven, prioritizes equity and social impact, and is designed to support continual learning and growth while remaining responsive to the greater ecosystem.



HOW THEY DUG DEEPER

This shift towards thinking of the board as "host" rather than "home" of governance was a big breakthrough. This would mean shifting their governance from a traditional board-centric model to a bolder, more agile, equitable, and broadly shared governance system.

To dig deeper, Findhelp 211 did the following:

- Brainstormed how it would work and feel if the board were "home" vs "host," and then thought about what that actually looks like in practice.
 - This led to the idea of a smaller board that has unique skill-sets, is highly linked to the ecosystem, and plays the role of connector.
- Identified what kinds of skill sets and characteristics they would need with this shift in the role of the board.
 - This resulted in rethinking how board recruitment is done, and uncovered a need to re-examine their current "matrix" model for recruiting.

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- Explored what enabling factors would help this approach to succeed.
 - ↳ Ideas included having a clear purpose (as a 'north star') and distributing power authentically through highly transparent accountabilities.
- Prototyped how this philosophy would apply to board recruitment.
 - ↳ A number of strategies emerged, including putting less focus on traditional credentials and moving away from the typical interview process. There was also the recognition that governance is a complex system and recruitment to governance work goes beyond just the board. Many others can shape it and contribute to it.

The simple shift in perspective from "home" to "host" opened the doors for Findhelp 211 to think about multiple aspects of governance differently. Folks shifted from thinking about the board as a centralized place of "control" that did all of the governance work, to thinking of it as a purpose-driven, facilitative body that builds trust and assurance that governance work is being done. One of its primary functions, beyond meeting its legal and regulatory requirements, is to articulate issues and assure stakeholders that the organization is acting on them; it's not to "own" all governance work.



The more boards understand that there's a different way to work, [the more it] will push leadership [work] even further.

- Sue Wilkinson



VIDEO:

[Transcript](#)

Sue and Jessica on Findhelp 211's next steps and what they're doing now.



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WHAT THEY'RE DOING NOW

As Findhelp 211 carries this work forward, they are now experimenting with the way they recruit for the board and thinking about how decision-making is shared more broadly in their ecosystem.

They have put out a call for board members who are interested in participating in the journey of reimagining governance. Instead of conducting one-on-one interviews with interested candidates, they are hosting group dialogues that explore purpose-driven governance in the context of their organization. They also continue to experiment with ad hoc committees and groups that convene strategically when issues arise, "challenging the very nature of committees."

The journey hasn't been a clear and linear pathway from intent to action. Findhelp 211 discovered that a key to success is finding the right guiding questions because they are the catalyst for change.



START YOUR OWN REIMAGINING JOURNEY!

Explore some **foundational tools** that help create the governance building blocks to innovations, and access the ***Governance as shared leadership*** tool in the Reimagining Governance Lab to dig in further.

[VISIT THE LAB >](#)

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