LEARNING LAB SPOTLIGHT:
Reimagining the board structure with Ontario Library Association

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:

Ontario Library Association (OLA)

KEY DETAILS:

- Founded in 1900, the library association has more than 5,000 members.

- It's composed of seven divisions representing a specific library subsector (*e.g. public libraries, school libraries, health libraries*). Each division has its own elected council. OLA's board is currently composed of an executive, the president and vice president of each council, and the executive director (ex-officio)

- 13 staff, 18 board members.

AT A GLANCE:
THEIR BIG "AHA!" MOMENTS

- Acknowledging that their governance structures need to evolve as the environment changes. There shouldn't be an assumption that "habit" is the best.

- Recognizing that the current governance structure was not the best way to engage OLA's membership. This presented an opportunity to take a more expansive view about who participates in governance, recruiting for the kinds of skills, knowledge, and experiences OLA needs in today's complex environment.

REIMAGINING
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✈ 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.

▷ VIDEO
Transcript

Shelagh Paterson (she/her) and Sarah Macintyre (she/her) speak to some of OLA's motivations for taking a reimagining governance journey.

◎ MOTIVATIONS FOR REIMAGINING GOVERNANCE

- The recent addition of a new division meant that the size of the board would increase; with 18 already on the board, it was feeling too large. Rather than just reducing the size of the board, there was an opportunity to step back, align governance with the organization's current needs and purpose, and rethink the structure.

- There were opportunities to engage OLA membership more meaningfully in governance decision-making, employ a deeper equity lens to governance work, and be more intentional about the recruitment of people with the right skills, attributes, and interest to fully participate on the OLA board.

◉ HOW THEY STARTED

- Created a snapshot of the unique organizational circumstances that shaped their governance.

- Reflected upon the role of governance in their organization, and how broader trends and forces were impacting their governance design.

- 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.

WHAT THEY LEARNED AND UNCOVERED

- The established pathways for board recruitment posed challenges.

  - Some board members felt overwhelmed because of the intense workload.

  - There was constant turnover which created barriers to strategic consistency, long-term planning, and deep engagement.

  - At times, there were challenges in fulfilling their Duty of Care and of Loyalty because they needed to represent their own divisions, while also acting in the best interests of OLA's members.

- The exploration of their circumstances, broader trends and forces, and the key functions the board must perform, shone a light on the need to proactively recruit the skills, experiences, attributes, and other characteristics required for board work.

HOW THEY DUG DEEPER

Participants created an innovation space in which they set aside the current structure and traditional assumptions and started from first principles.

They asked themselves, "Who are all the stakeholders who should or could have a voice in OLA's governance?" What began as a typical list of stakeholders, which included OLA staff and members, quickly expanded to include groups such as library students, different kinds of library users, and information workers. There was a recognition that OLA could draw from this more expansive network of stakeholders, enabling them to draw more voices and participants in governance.

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> **"**
> [It] gives you permission to move away from [the idea that a] person must be in [a specific role] to be on the board, or to make decisions in governance.
>
> - Shelagh Paterson

This insight led to deeper conversations about the kinds of skills, characteristics, experiences, and perspectives that are needed, and could contribute to OLA's governance, if it was done really well. They also explored the principles that they would want to drive their governance design, such as agility, feasibility, diversity, and a focus on purpose.

The journey concluded by looking at what was important to Councils in their relationship with OLA and realized that much of it wasn't directly tied to the regular work of the board. The interests of Councils, and other stakeholders, could be met through a variety of engagement strategies, which included, but wasn't limited to sitting on the OLA board.

VIDEO

Transcript

Shelagh and Sarah highlight their key takeaways from working on reimagining governance, and discuss some of their next steps.

> **"**
> We were working towards exploring options, identifying new areas of consideration. So sometimes the best conversations were those where the perspectives were really divergent [...] that's where the richness and value of this [work] comes from.
>
> - Sarah Macintyre

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👆 WHAT THEY'RE DOING NOW

OLA continues to develop strategies to implement these changes, while engaging their broader membership along the way. It's been important to articulate why this change is beneficial to the organization, and how it will align governance with OLA's purpose and work.

Some steps they're taking include:

- Reviewing their current bylaws, and working to revise them to accommodate the changes.

- Putting new recruitment strategies in place, driven by a competency matrix, to excite a broad network of people with the potential of governance work. They're also considering how sector specialists can engage in governance without sitting on the board.

🌱 START YOUR OWN REIMAGINING JOURNEY!

Explore some **foundational tools** that help create the governance building blocks to innovations.

VISIT THE LAB ❯

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