

LEARNING LAB SPOTLIGHT:

Purpose-driven stakeholder engagement

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.

ORGANIZATIONS & KEY DETAILS:

CYSTIC FIBROSIS CANADA (CFC)

- Founded in 1960 by parents of those with cystic fibrosis, now a national nonprofit and charitable organization.
- Engages in research, programming, advocacy, and information sharing with the mission to end cystic fibrosis.
- 58 staff, 14 board members.

KINGSTON COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTRES (KCHC)

- One of 83 community health centres in Ontario and part of the Ontario Health Teams (OHT) leadership table.
- Several locations with different services and programs.
- 200 staff, 11 board members

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD GROUP (TNG)

- Toronto-based charitable organization with is a merger of three organizations: Central Neighbourhood House, Neighbourhood Link Support Services, and St. Stephen's Community House with a multi-faceted board structure.
- 800 staff, 21 board members



AT A GLANCE: THEIR BIG "AHA!" MOMENTS

- Engagement of the communities served by the organization should be driven by agreed-upon principles. These principles would guide who participates in decision-making, so that there is alignment on who's involved, with what decisions, and when. It shouldn't presume the structures already in place are the right ones.
- Broader, more agile engagement of the organizations' communities in governance is necessary to be responsive to the current and complex environment.

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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.



MOTIVATIONS FOR REIMAGINING GOVERNANCE

Each organization had unique internal and external circumstances, but shared common motivations for doing things differently.

- Governance needs to evolve as organizational circumstances change (e.g., merger, shift in the communities served, growth in services).
- It's a great moment in time to question assumptions, push the status quo, and hold generative conversations with the board, staff leadership, and the people served by the organizations.



VIDEOS

The board and leadership from CFC and TNG share their thoughts on why their organizations decided to reimagine governance, and why it's important for other nonprofits to do so.



[Transcript](#)



[Transcript](#)

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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 impacted 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.



I was really taken by the Reimagining Governance concept that **you don't have to be on the board to be involved with governance**. It's not just about building the perfect board, because it's an illusion to have the perfect board. But you can have better stakeholder voices in your governance.

- Bill Sinclair (he/him), The Neighbourhood Group



WHAT THEY LEARNED AND UNCOVERED

- While there are some restrictions in how governance is designed (e.g., *funder requirements, complex system-level decision-making*), there's a lot of room for innovation in who's participating in governance and how it's done.
- Equity needs to be embedded into governance processes, practices, and culture, especially in how boards engage others in governance work.
- The board doesn't need to do all the work of governance, it can be shared by others in the governance ecosystem. Broader participation in governance also creates better quality decisions and helps ensure the organization is moving in the right directions.

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- Engagement in governance should be intentional, so those served by the organization are participating in meaningful ways with multiple touchpoints. It's important to avoid a "representative" approach, which can lead to tokenism.



VIDEO

[Transcript](#)

Members of The Neighbourhood Group team and board discuss some of their key learnings from Reimagining Governance.



Before we went through this, I had a too narrow, legalistic definition of governance and didn't think about all the other things we do in governance in a broader sense, and how we include different people along that continuum of governance.

- Leona Pinsky (she/her), Cystic Fibrosis Canada



Every decision doesn't have to be made the same way... what we're trying to do now is try to figure out a number of things that we could decide differently.

- Samira Viswanathan (she/her), The Neighbourhood Group

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HOW THEY DUG DEEPER

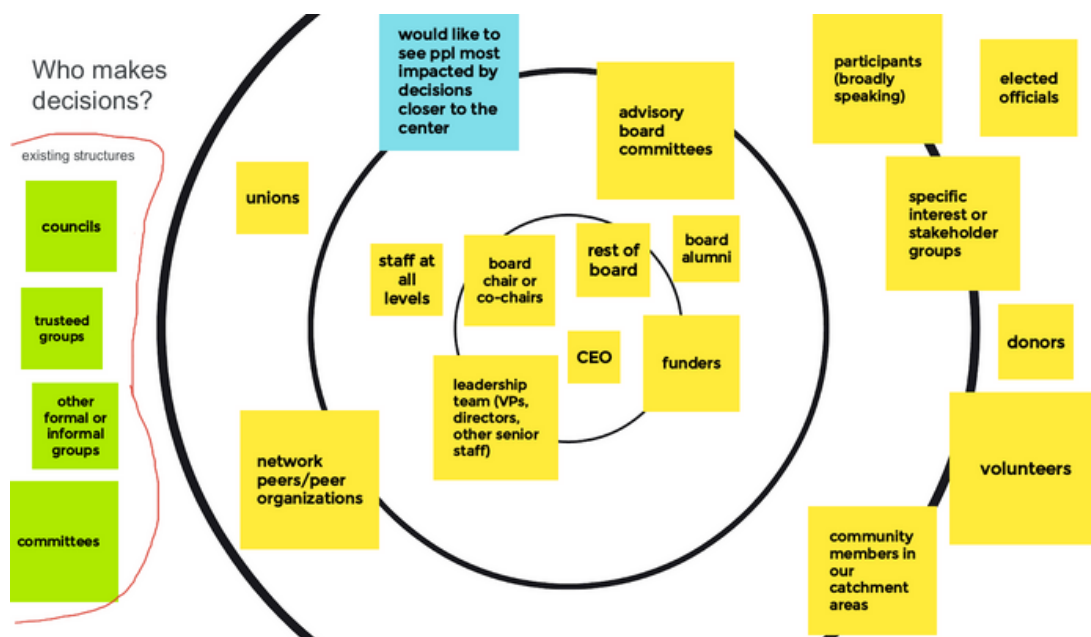
Each organization experimented with a practice that helped identify who could participate in governance and how. They focused on insights and principles, rather than immediately diving into implementation.

The practice followed these steps:

! This snapshot story is a broad overview. Find the detailed practice steps in the tool **Governance as shared leadership: who participates and how tool** in the [Reimagining Governance Lab](#).

» Map all the people who participate in or influence governance decisions.

In this jam board example, the organization explored who participates in and influences governance and where they sit in the governance ecosystem.

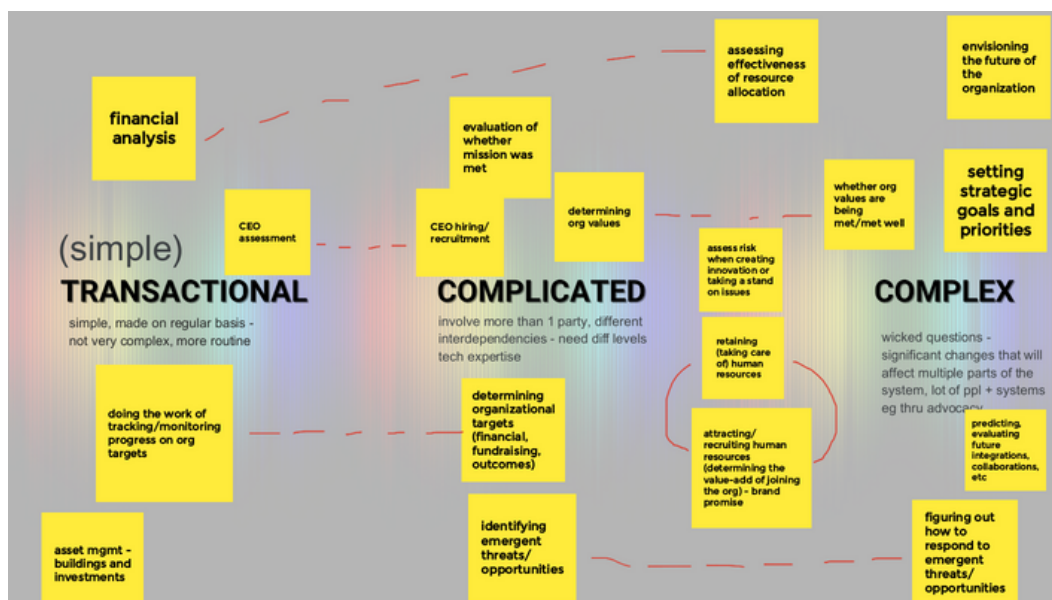


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- ▶▶ Brainstorm different governance decisions focusing on governance work, not operational decisions. Place them on a continuum based on the type of decision.

In this jam board example, participants mapped different kinds of decisions, playing with how governance responsibilities can be broken down based on specific tasks.



- ▶▶ Select a governance decision and explore where different stakeholders could fit onto this continuum:



See the tool [Improve governance by unpacking responsibilities and decisions](#) and [Continuum of participation in a nonprofit's governance](#) for a more in-depth look at the continuums.

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These conversations led to a number of guiding principles and questions that could help with considering where various stakeholders might exist in the engagement continuum, and framing key supportive strategies.

Some examples included:

- Engagement is purpose-driven, starting with the decision/task/function that needs to be fulfilled, so the supporting processes and structures are designed with intent.
- Those engaged in governance decision-making must reflect the shifting landscape of who our organization serves.
- Equity is embedded into all aspects of engagement in governance, including choices about who participates and how it happens.
- The roles and expectations of stakeholders in governance decision-making are clear and transparent, including the kind of decision being made, the required accountabilities and any conditions that need to be met. The board is also clear about its commitment to them, including how input will be used and shared decision-making will be done.



[VIDEO](#)

[Transcript](#)



Kelly Grover and Leona Pinsky discuss the benefits of examining their governance design with more intention, and how it gave them the confidence to move forward with doing things differently.

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- Benefits and costs of broader participation in governance are clearly articulated (e.g., *enriched, more equitable decision-making; increased transparency; requirements and complexity; risks of divergent views and misaligned values*). Strategies are designed to harness the benefits and mitigate the costs. There is also consideration of the cost or impact of not engaging particular stakeholders.
- If stakeholders are collaborating on or entrusted to make governance decisions, they must be willing and able to share in accountabilities for decisions; bring layered lenses and experiences to the decisions; and focus on the “bigger picture,” setting aside any personal agendas and vested interests.



WHAT THEY'RE DOING NOW

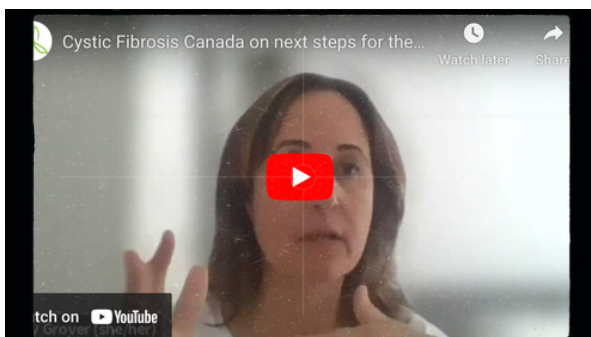
CFC

- Identify measures of success, such as alignment with the changed organizational circumstances and more nimble decision-making.
- Continue to bring intentionality into the design of governance engagement, including determining what kinds of governance engagement structures and processes make sense for CFC moving forward. Consider the implications for the bylaws and governance policies.



[VIDEO](#)

[Transcript](#)



Kelly Grover discusses some of the next steps that CFC will take to continue their reimagining governance journey.

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KCHC

- Addressing barriers to input into governance, particularly by harder-to-reach and under-represented groups. Exploring strategies such as framing questions through their lens/experience, watching for assumptions about who's interested in what, and being aware of the culture of the board and how it's perceived. Also, seeking out the bridge builders who have connections into the communities.
- Identifying a few key questions that can be consistently asked by the board when opportunities or decisions emerge, and could benefit from broader engagement.
- Exploring enhanced board-to-board conversations with those who have shared interests, particularly beyond local organizations, and how to provide leadership of agencies that aren't represented at "tables" (e.g., *Ontario Health Tables/OHTs*).

TNG

- Continue to examine what could be released from the board so it can focus on being more generative. They're also considering how governance roles could be filled if they were to shrink the size of the board, noting that they need to think more broadly than the board structure to avoid "propping up the old model."
- Experiment with smaller pilots to help apply their learnings.



[VIDEO](#)

[Transcript](#)



The Neighbourhood Group team and board share some thoughts on their next steps.

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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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