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What Makes Us So Special?  
COBWS and our Board

Too much time is spent saying "our board is really unique". We must realize that conceptually *all boards do the same thing using the same set of processes*. We in voluntarism must begin to recognize our similarities.

William R. Conrad, in  
*The Effective Voluntary  
Board of Directors*

There are two items of conventional wisdom that circulate whenever staff and the board come together. The first is the re-affirmation that COBWS is a special and unique organization. The second is a re-statement of the unity of vision and purpose among the members of the board and the staff. I wish to challenge both these accepted truths: COBWS is much closer to every other non-profit organization than we care to admit, and the gulf between board and staff needs to be acknowledged. It is time we looked outward, to place ourselves in a context of similar organizations, social realities, time and place. We are not immune from our environment: we are subject to social forces which, recognized or not, to a large extent determine the direction of the organization. If we are more aware of the context in which we operate, knowledgeable of what has happened and is happening to similar organizations, we can more effectively direct our own future. Let us look around, and see what there is to learn.

*Non-Profit Organizations and their Boards: A History*

The context in which I will place COBWS is in that of a non-profit organization operating in North America in the late 20th century. Essentially, all social agencies have the same organizational structure. At the top of each agency, with full legal authority, is the board of

directors. It is from the board, and from the board alone, that the director and staff receive their authority to operate.<sup>1</sup> Responsible to the board, and the senior salaried member of the organization, is the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The CEO may have one of several titles including Executive Director, Director or President. The CEO has day to day operating authority, including the supervision of salaried professional staff as well as volunteers.

Boards may be categorized according to their membership. Typically, board members are chosen from one of three groupings, purportedly representing:

1. the constituency (those served by the organization),
2. the staff, volunteers or members (those implementing the programme), or
3. the community at large (those not directly involved in the organization's programme).

Although boards may have representation from two or more of these groupings, normally a board is dominated by one of the three groups.

Today, constituency and staff boards are in the minority. This is probably due to a strong ethic that social agencies should be monitored by an independent authority. Thus, boards are typically composed of community representatives, which in practice means members of the corporate, business and professional sectors.<sup>2</sup> Representatives of the constituency or the staff are usually excluded.

Although COBWS was not founded until 1976, an examination of the history of non-profit organizations provides a useful context in which to understand its development. Because of their long history, the development of cultural organizations is particularly instructive.

In the 19th century, cultural organizations in North America were either producer co-operative organizations (such as orchestras), or privately-owned profit-oriented ventures (such as museums). About the turn of the century, co-operatives and profit ventures gave way to non-profit organizations controlled by elite boards of directors. The reasons for these changes

<sup>1</sup> Glueck 1972: 119

<sup>2</sup> Hartogs: xix, 10 - 12

itself, or of the daily workings of the organization.<sup>10</sup>

### *Contemporary Boards*

Corporate board members indicate their support of the board structure through their willingness to participate actively within it. Reasons for this support can be gleaned through an examination of the reasons board members give for their own service, and their criteria for selection of new members of the board. As boards are essentially self-perpetuating through selective recruitment, the assessment by board members of the likelihood and desirability of structural change through change in board representation will be of special interest.

In a New York survey of corporate members of boards of social service, cultural and educational non-profit organizations conducted by Touche Ross & Co.<sup>11</sup>, board members were practically unanimous in stating that "general interest in the organization's purpose" and "willingness to give time" were necessary qualifications for board members. Other qualifications stated may be grouped as follows:

1. community influence (two-thirds of respondents)
2. working knowledge of organization, diversity of other interests, ability to contribute or solicit funds (one-half of respondents)
3. business skills (one-third of respondents)

These results clearly indicate that corporate board members feel that the board should be composed of people with interest, time, community influence and specific skills. The desirability of representation of the community at large or the constituency served was not mentioned.

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<sup>10</sup> The Touche Ross Survey found that only 56% of board members believed that a working knowledge of the organization was necessary. p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Touche Ross 1979. The survey focussed on business executives who were members of non-profit boards, that is, excluding board members who were not business executives.

Further insights can be gained by considering the criteria current board members would use to select new members of the board. In a survey of board members of Greater New York Fund agencies, Hartogs<sup>12</sup> reported that willingness to serve was by far the most dominant characteristic. However, about half of board members surveyed agreed that the next most important qualifications were position in the community, and expertise in a specialized field. Access to funding and important connexions were rated next most important (40%). Unlike the Touche Ross survey, some board members did mention constituency representation as important. They were in the minority, however, only 30% feeling that it was an important criterion.

Thus, board members see themselves as providing independent guidance, community influence, access to funding and special expertise (mainly business experience) for the organization.

### *Forces of Diversity*

Unlike COBWS, most organizations do recognize major differences of world-view between board members and other members of the agency. A series of studies comparing the ideologies of board members of social welfare organizations with staff, show that board members are economically more conservative, perceive less inadequacies in service, and are more volunteer-minded than the professional staff. Additionally, the board members characteristically believe that it is too easy to get help and that the government is doing too much for people.<sup>13</sup>

Typically, new board members are approached to join the board, rather than they themselves initiating a request to join.<sup>14</sup> Most commonly, the prior association that new board members had had with the organization was that of financial contributor. Although about one-third had previously worked as volunteers within the organization in some other capacity, very few new board members were ever members of the constituency served by the agency.<sup>15</sup>

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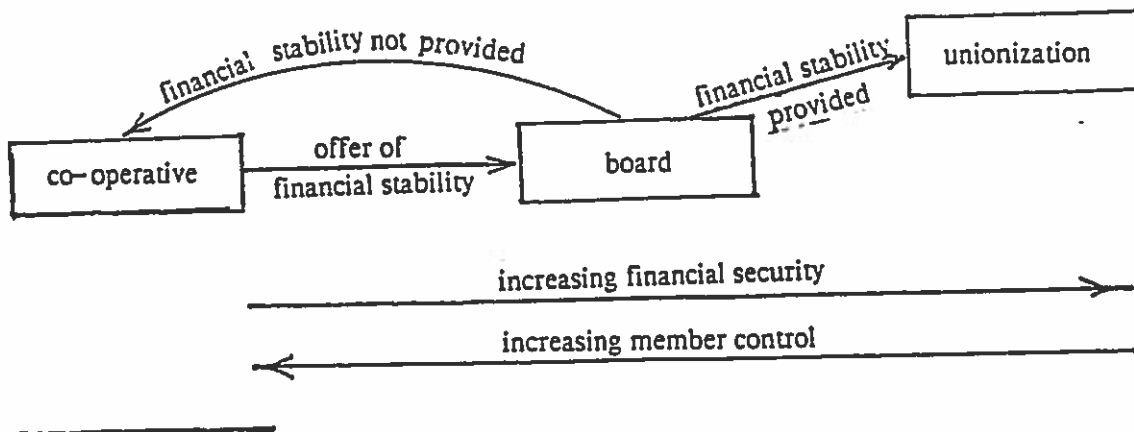
<sup>12</sup> Hartogs 1974: 69. Unlike the Touche Ross survey, this one sampled from all board members, of which 35% were "businessmen".

<sup>13</sup> Krammer 1965: 108-9

<sup>14</sup> Hartogs 1974: 20

<sup>15</sup> Hartogs 1974: 195

Figure 1  
Financial Stability and Organizational Control



1. Although COBWS has always had a board, it is only in recent years that the board has fully exercised its legal authority as the controlling body of the organization.
2. The composition of the present board is very much a result of a financial crisis. During the period in which the financial crisis was brought under control, the board's outdoor education representation has declined, while the corporate component has become a majority.
3. The conservative/liberal split characteristic of most board/employee comparisons is likely true at COBWS.
4. Since the 1960's, non-profit organizations have been turning increasingly to professional managers. COBWS has, after an exhaustive process, hired its first professional "manager".
5. The staff has perceived the increased exercise of board and administrative control. This summer, for the first time, some staff members were talking of a need for unionization.

This list is not intended to judge the changes that have been made. Rather, we need to

be shaken from our belief that we are really and naturally "special". We need to look around to see what is happening to other organizations, what forces are shaping their development, and admit that *we are not exempt from these forces*.

With this as background, I wish to ask the following questions. Answers will not be attempted. Rather, the answers must arise from discussions among all of us. The important point is that all members of the COBWS community must have real input if the answers are to be workable.

1. What type of board do we now require? The present board is very much the product of a financial crisis. Through the dedication and hard work of its members, the crisis has been largely overcome. But, what sort of board is most appropriate now that the financial concerns are largely in hand?
2. What is the role of the community vis a vis the board? There has been a steady move of exercised power from the community to the board. A perceived powerlessness is one of the necessary criteria for unionization, which would destroy the organization we know.
3. How do we maintain financial viability? If the financial concerns are no longer all-encompassing, how do we re-order our activities without losing financial integrity and expertise?

## Innovation at COBWS

As organizations mature, there is the danger that they will slip into routine and stagnation. COBWS is no different. In order to maintain vitality, such organizations must consciously encourage innovation: asking new questions, forming new assessments, new responses, new visions. Innovations do not just happen, rather, they occur within certain, sometimes unique, environments. Thus, an awareness of conditions which tend to spawn and nurture good innovations is essential.

Two schools of thought have traditionally dominated innovation discussions: that of the evolutionists, and that of the innovationalists. Evolutionists saw innovation as spontaneous change within the organizations. Innovationalists saw the changes as induced by creative individuals. The study of social movements brings together these two approaches and can provide useful models of innovation.<sup>1</sup>

### *Conditions for Innovation in Formal Systems*

All formal organizations have a hierarchical structure of some sort. In this section, the term "top" will be used to administrators, policy-makers, management, over-seers, and so on. The "bottom" is the group responsible for implementing the innovation, or the group effected by it, or both. "Top" and "bottom", thus, are relative terms, defined by the scope of the innovation. A specific individual may be in the "top" for one innovation, but in the "bottom" for another.

A survey of theories of social movements implies that certain conditions must be met in order for significant changes to occur:

1. Environmental conditions:
  - a. There must be a general feeling of dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs, either at the top or at the bottom.

<sup>1</sup> See Ponsioen 1972.

- b. The bottom must be psychologically prepared for change. If the top is dissatisfied with the present situation while the bottom is satisfied, the top needs to disseminate its own dissatisfaction to align the bottom to its concerns.

### 2. Individual conditions:

- a. Some person or group has to take responsibility for the new trends, identifying the feeling of frustration and taking the risk of alienating the established interests.
- b. Those who take responsibility for inducing change must interact carefully with unarticulated demands.
- c. The innovator is he or she who can organize, articulate and present the initiative to those in power.

### *Models of Organizational Innovation*

Such a listing implies that some individuals are more innovative than others, and that the majority of people are either followers or reactionaries. There are four models by which individuals attempt to have their proposed innovations accepted within organizational systems. The first three models assume innovations are introduced from the top, the last considers innovations originating from the base of the organization.

#### 1. Imposition Model.

The order is imposed from the top, to be obeyed and implemented. This is not very effective in practice. The intent is often transformed as the message is relayed to the ranks. In addition, the lower echelons will only fully implement innovations which do not challenge own interests. Apparent obedience coupled with unchanged personal interests means that in reality, life continues as before.

#### 2. Conviction Model.

Here the top issues an order accompanied by reasons and rationale. If the reasons coincide with the interests of the

acceptance<sup>1</sup>. Although conceptually distinct, in practice they are not clearly separated.

1. Invention.

Invention is the discovery or recognition of an idea or device that is socially relevant. This means that it must be shown to be useful, economically, socially or spiritually.

2. Diffusion.

This stage begins with the acceptance of the idea or device by a set of diffusers. Diffusers are those who control the lines of communication: authorities in organizations, community leaders, those who convey information from one group or another either formally or informally. An innovation that runs against the interest of the diffusers has little chance of success. Their power derives from the fact that diffusion is a technique in itself, directing the innovation to those who will use it. The more formal or "closed" the social system, the less likely that diffusion can occur outside established channels.

Diffusion may deform the innovation in a planned, systematic way if it is consciously being tested, or in more unexpected ways as the users respond to it.

3. Acceptance.

Acceptance must occur on three levels: those of the community leaders or controllers, the institutional authorities, and the general community membership. There are three stages in acceptance:

- a. Awareness is a prerequisite for all acceptance. Publicity and demonstration are the most important factors in increasing awareness.
- b. Evaluation of the innovation by the community is almost spontaneous. Is it recognized as being advantageous? More importantly, does it threaten personal values, morals, security or objectives? Failure to address these concerns may lead to considerable anxiety among the users. The innovation should be shown to be *consistent* with the prevailing

values, or, if this is not possible, these values should be addressed directly, giving them as much attention as the innovation itself.

- c. Trial is a step of provisional acceptance. Earlier restricted acceptance may not translate into success when the innovation is widely disseminated. Further adaptation of the innovation may be necessary, either locally or more generally throughout the system.

#### *The COBWS Community*

If this model is tentatively accepted as a starting point for looking at community processes, two points are worth making. First, the community is *different* from the formal organization. Thus, it requires different models, processes, strategies and structures than those of the institution. The formal organization cannot be a model for the community.

Secondly, if the model sketched above is accepted as reasonable, areas of weakness may possibly be identified. I do not believe there is any shortage of ideas within the community. The weakness may lie in those ideas not being developed to a useful stage and then diffused. Diffusion may be the weak link.

The community has traditionally relied on institutional authorities (Course Directors, Programme Manager, Programme Director) and, to a lesser degree, monthly Community Meetings. Community diffusers need to be encouraged: people who will take a good idea and run with it, spreading the word, getting feedback, keeping communications open. It may turn out that a new emphasis on diffusion will not be sufficient to meet our goals, but it does seem to be a realistic starting point for dealing with community innovation.

#### *Conclusions*

The organization and the community require different models and processes for innovation. Interaction models seem most appropriate for the formal side of the organization. The community processes, like those of all communities, are not as easily defined. A model has been presented that may assist in focussing community thinking.

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<sup>1</sup> See Barnett 1953

## Salary, Status and Community: A New Approach

In the August community meeting, a new Course Director remarked how much she has enjoyed having the opportunity to work with staff, and how nice it was to be able to change jobs. As a matter of fact, she said, it would be nice if more people shared jobs, permitting more of us to gain better perspectives, grow in new ways, and recharge ourselves. The response from the community was positive: it is the type of innovation we like to support.

However, there are many factors which frustrate ideas such as job-sharing. One factor, but by no means the only one, is the current salary schedule, and the manner in which we recognize our staff, financially and otherwise. However, job-sharing is not the only concept adversely affected by the structure we maintain.

In this paper, I wish to examine our current structure, and the implications it has for aiding or frustrating our visions. I also wish to propose an alternative system, based on different principles. However, primarily I wish to generate discussion, and a willingness to accept responsibility and ownership for the systems we implement and maintain.

### *The Current Structure*

Our current salary structure does not have a written or consciously-expressed rationale. Rather, it mimics the form used by most organizations in our society. Through this system, traditional organizations recognize certain individual characteristics:

- 1) Previous experience and training
- 2) Professional responsibility
- 3) Seniority in the hierarchy

An individual who has more of these characteristics, or holds a position which requires more of them, will receive more money than one who has or requires less. Thus Course Directors earn more than Instructors (more seniority, usually more experience), Instructors receive more

than Assistants (more seniority, more experience, maybe more responsibility), and Assistants receive more than Support (more seniority, usually more responsibility). Positions outside the programme hierarchy, such as the homeplace managers, are slotted in somewhere in the middle. The result is that we currently have a system with about 35 different salary levels, roughly one for each member of staff. Theoretically, it would be possible for no two people at Homeplace to be earning the same amount of money.

What is wrong with this system? Several things:

1. It creates an unnatural pressure for upward mobility, encouraging movement up the hierarchy, and discouraging all other movements. Lateral or downward movements are penalized financially. Thus, burnt-out instructors are encouraged to stay in the field if they cannot afford the pay cut to move to Support.
2. The system over-emphasizes the importance of senior staff. By underpaying junior staff, we are not recruiting the best available people, nor are we able to hold them long. Essentially, we are limiting ourselves to those who can afford to volunteer for the summer. This has important implications for our stated objectives of developing Canadian staff. Why do so few of the women internes return to the school? Why, ten years after the start of the interne programme, are most of our Instructors still American? Why, except for one month this last summer, have we not developed a single female Canadian Course Director since the first years of the school? Part of the answer, I believe, lies in our failure to properly recruit, support and encourage, through salary and other means, our junior staff.
3. The system conflicts with our stated goals of community. This summer past, some homeplace staff made five times what others did. That gap, now reduced to three times, is still much too large. The messages within a community which distributes rewards and recognition so unevenly are not lost on its members. A community's actions must be



further growth opportunities for the new staff who work with them. The more the staff are able to explore different perspectives, the better they will understand the organization and be able to bring innovative ideas to the fore.

Instead of using money to recognize past training, part of the financial package for staff could be used to encourage *future* training. For example, each staff member, regardless of position, could earn a credit of, say, \$30 per month to be use for his or her personal training or development. The use of this money would be primarily the responsibility of the individual staff person. Although the individual would not directly receive the money, it would be paid out on his or her behalf by the school for training that would benefit both the staff member and the institution.

For example, a staff member who worked 4 months, would end up with a \$120 credit that could be used towards such things as:

- a. part of the cost of an EMT course
- b. travel expenses to attend the AEE conference
- c. travel expenses to work an exchange with NCOBS
- d. food for a major expedition
- e. winter courses in order to become qualified to instruct in the winter.

The school could place reasonable restrictions or conditions on the use of the funds, such as only paying for winter courses for staff indicating a desire to work in the winter, or requiring a report of a conference attended or exchange programme worked.

While a great deal needs to be done to ensure that we develop good quality Canadian staff, it should remain a priority to enrich the programme through the recruitment of top-quality people from the U.S. and overseas. For suitable top people to be brought to homeplace, a travel subsidy could be paid.

### *The Challenge*

The challenge to the community is to fully accept a broader responsibility for its own structures,

and to examine and, if necessary, question existing ones. Secondly, the community must create new structures, or consciously maintain its established ones, which are shown to be consistent with its philosophy. The more we are aware of the type of community we desire, the more our structures can be brought into line to further, rather than hinder, our goals. The responsibility for this, is ours.

Experiment. See what works." Thus, the students slip and slide their way over the rock, not sure what they are supposed to be experiencing, other than "climbing". Although the instructor conducts a wrap-up session before moving up top to begin the rope sessions, the students do not have an opportunity to integrate their experience into their concepts. The conceptual structures are provided too late to be of any use.

A more appropriate approach would be to recognize the interdependence of concepts and experience. Thus, they must be developed *together*. A strategy might look like this: go over safety rules (concepts), let the students play on the rock a short while (experience), talk about the rock, balance, holds (concepts), go back on the rock (experience), talk about posture, games, ways of moving on the rock (concepts), then back on the rock again. Similar strategies could be used for all complex activities: whitewater, map and compass, canoe strokes, and so on.

### *Conclusions*

Most good instructors likely do operate in the manner suggested, as they have found such strategies to be effective. I have tried to show *why* this is so. It is not enough just to provide the students with the experience. In addition we must also provide the framework which allows the student to both see and, hopefully, understand. Mainly, the instructor must be aware that the student may not experience the same things as he or she does, and must recognize the times when to pause and consolidate, or lay the groundwork for further experiences. We owe them both.

### *References*

Franks, C.E.S., *The Canoe and Whitewater*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977

Popper, Karl, *The Logic of Discovery*, New York: Science Editions, 1961

opportunity to develop programmes for both our regular clientel, as well as higher-risk groups.

Questions have been raised regarding some of the programmes we may be moving into. We have solid expertise in certain areas, yet are lacking in others which are required for some new initiatives. We need to look carefully why we wish to become involved in certain programmes. There may good reasons such as a combination of need for such a programme, no one else doing it, and we have the expertise to develop and implement it. On the other hand, it is easy to have programme directions led by the availability of grants, their public relations value, to compensate for declining enrolments or closing of programmes, or to stake out new territory against possible competition.

Once we have decided to take a certain initiative, we must assess our resources and areas of expertise. If we are lacking, three possible avenues exist: develop the expertise ourselves, hire people with the required background, or initiate joint programming with an organization which has the experience in areas we do not. Rather than re-inventing the wheel, it seems to me that the latter option would be the most appropriate, availing us of the depth and knowledge of an experienced organization. Where our shortcomings were less severe, the middle option, hiring someone possessing the necessary experience, could also be appropriate.

#### *Broadening our Base*

Most of our students currently come from middle or upper-middle class backgrounds. Often, a desire is expressed to broaden this base, not only by programming for "special populations", but also by drawing from a greater range of occupations, incomes and backgrounds.

The first barrier is financial. However, we do have a scholarship/bursary programme for students unable to pay the full cost. To the best of my knowledge, no one has been turned down for financial reasons.

The larger barrier is presented by our middle class orientation. Whatever we think of their merits, ideas such as consensus, environmental awareness, sharing of feelings, and so on *are* middle class, wasp ideas. Someone whose background contains different values and ways of relating with people will not be able to adjust to expected brigade dynamics as well as

those raised in a contemporary middle class environment. Often, adoption of the brigade values is done for reasons for survival rather than conviction. Youth at risk, who have learned very well how to be survivors, often play the game, telling the instructors what they think they want to hear without adopting any of the new ideas presented. This is not to suggest that they are being totally manipulative. Rather, it is the way to survive the course, and obviously, the instructors *do* want to hear these things.

What this implies for instructing lower class, youth at risk, cross-cultural or other such students, is that, if we intend to integrate them into our middle class brigades, we need to have active strategies for doing so, and for dealing with the inevitable problems. Too often, I think, we figuratively throw the student into unknown waters and expect him or her to swim.

For entire brigades of such students, the tone and expectations may have to change. For youth at risk, we can draw on the experience of such organizations as DARE and Enviros. For brigades made up of other groups, we need to identify and use resources which can help us to better understand and deal with their backgrounds. We must not assume that we can just pick it up as we go.

In short, we need to acknowledge that we hold certain values and expectations, and prefer certain ways of operating that outsiders can easily label. We must not assume the universality or natural superiority of these values, rather, we must become aware of divergent values and methods brought into courses by our students, and articulate means of actively dealing with them.