Community Development and the 'Policy Governance' Approach:

Have we voted out Democracy?

by DAVID KENKEL and PAUL PRESTIDGE

Practice

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'This is what democracy looks like' by Charlie Owen, CC NC license

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ABSTRACT

We argue that the ways community organisations are typically structured, with a Board, Chief Executive (CE) and workers, creates an inherently anti-democratic dynamic. We suggest that the hierarchical concentration of power in the governance board and CE, and neo-liberal distinctions between governance and management roles, cut against the inclusive aspirations and hopes inherent in community development.

INTRODUCTION

> The solution is not to 'integrate' them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become 'beings for themselves' (Freire, 1972, p. 48).

The authors have spent considerable time as NGO employees and managers, and in governance roles. We have been friends for a long time and share a passion for community development's commitment to small-scale democracy. Our mutual involvement in social justice activities and organisations goes back to the 1970s and to varying degrees we have both remained active. We also experienced the growing ascendancy of the neo-liberal paradigm through the 1980s and 1990s, and now into the 21st century. It is striking for us that we are the last generation who lived for a time as young adults without the shadow of that ascendance colouring our social world. We decided to write this piece after noticing in recent years similar sorts of 'anti-democratic' problems happening in a wide range of community development organisations and NGOs.

Somewhat tongue in cheek we take the opposite position to Tolstoy's famous statement that: 'Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.' (Tolstoy, 2015, p.1). Inverting Tolstoy, we have noticed that happy NGOs are usually happy in their own unique ways, whereas unhappy NGOs are typically unhappy in very similar ways and, we have begun to suspect, for very similar structural reasons.

A common feature of these 'unhappy' problems is a reduction in the sorts of behaviours and attitudes one might associate with a vigorous and healthy participatory democracy. That is: a sense that everyone can speak freely and that their opinion is valued, a shared sense that everyone owns the work, and robust inclusive discussion that leads to actions aligned with the aspirations of the many not just the few.

Approach to the Topic

A position we take is that structures determine behaviour rather than the other way round. Structures of governance, in this instance variations on the Carver approach (trade-marked as the policy governance model) (Carver and Carver, 2006; The Authoritative Website for the Carver Policy Governance© Model, 2015), determine how power, authority and information flows operate in the working lives of many New Zealand NGO managers, employees and governance boards. We argue that within any organisation, and dependent on structured role, these operations of power, authority and information flow tend to make it easier for some to speak, while making it harder for others. The authority (or lack of it) that pertains to a role becomes the enabling or disabling factor in what can be voiced, who can voice it, and to whom, and in where and when opinions and ideas are legitimately able to be reported. Following this position, we argue that uncritical adoption of a business derived structure of governance, without an effort to critique and examine the specific power effects of its fundamental premises and operations, poorly serves the democratic ethos of community development.

Our specific critique in this paper focuses on Carver's policy governance model which concentrates power and accountability in the organisation's Board and Chief Executive (CE). We explore the effects of the power and information funnelling of these NGO governance-management structures in New Zealand.

About the Carver Model

The Carver model of governance constructs an organisational hierarchy with the governance board as the ultimate decision makers, having authority over direction and policy. The Board employs a Chief Executive/Manager to manage the organisation, and report to the Board on her/his performance in relation to the decisions, direction and policy set by the Board. The staff employed in the organisation are outside of these power arrangements, and are accountable to the CE.

The following quote captures some of the key elements of the Carver model:

> We recommend that the board use a single point of delegation and hold this position accountable for meeting all the board's expectations for organizational performance. Naturally, it is essential that the board delegate to this position all the authority that such extensive accountability deserves. The use of a CEO position considerably simplifies the board's job. Using a CEO, the board can express its expectations for the entire organization without having to work out any of the internal, often complex, divisions of labour. *Therefore, all the authority granted by the board to the organization is actually granted personally to the CEO. All the accountability of the organization to meet board expectations is charged personally to the CEO.* The board, in effect, has one employee. (Our emphases). (The Authoritative Website for the Carver Policy Governance® Model, 2015, para. 23).

On reading this explanation, we are not surprised that the model is fraught with tensions around the application of power. However, we are curious why community development organisations, so actively engaged *externally* in empowering communities and championing the liberation or active voice of the marginalised, have been so uncritical in adopting an *internal* approach that so explicitly funnels or concentrates power into an elite minority: the Board and Chief Executive.

We believe this funnelling produces an inherently problematic dynamic that operates to marginalise the voices of wider staff and community. In addition, we see an unhelpful tension between the Board and CE. In a typical scenario, the CE's reporting becomes increasingly selective to avoid Board scrutiny. While initially content to accept the superficial story that 'all's well', after a time the Board will start asking questions with increasing levels of interrogation. Our observation is that these effects operate irrespective of the experience and character of CE or board members, and in our opinion have at minimum a chilling effect on the sorts of robust discussion and capacity to disagree that lie at the heart of small scale democracy.

At risk of labouring the point, our take on this set of problems is that the frequently dysfunctional relationship between CE, board and workers is a symptom of the sort of human behaviours that inevitably fall out of particular kinds of structure, rather than an expression of an interpersonal human problem in isolation from the structures. Nor do we think that the typical problems we see reflect a lack of clarity around the parties' respective roles or discipline in keeping to their roles, as is commonly asserted by

the legions of consulting expertise that operate in the ecology of the NGO world.

Our thesis is that we need first to look at the operating structures that set up these tense and stifling roles and dynamics. We assert that our wide-scale failure as community development organisations to critique our own structures of governance, in particular with an eye to the internal effects of their associated power relations, does us harm as a sector. Amongst other harms, we believe it weakens our ability to speak with internal cohesion and the passion of solidarity.

What Do the Problems Look Like?
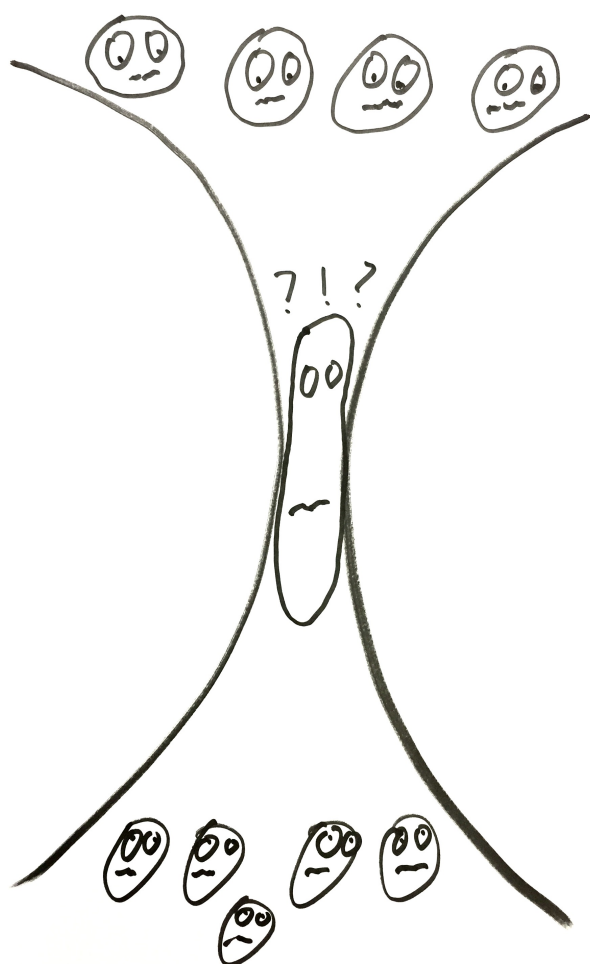
Common problems for NGOs involve a breakdown of trust between the board and CE, extending to include staff when they express their discontent loudly enough

that it comes to the ears of the board directly rather than through the CE.

Others (Bradshaw, Hayday and Armstrong 2007; Campbell, 2011) have also identified the major weakness of the Carver model as its concentration of power within a small elite group of the governance board and CE, which disenfranchises and potentially alienates the rest of the organisation. This weakness is reflected in our experiences of being a) a board member who thinks he's getting a 'snow job'; b) a CE who is anxiously awaiting his interrogation by the board; and   c) a staff member whose passionate project is being misrepresented by his CE to the Board. From each of these positions, the Carver model has been problematic.

In typical scenarios that we encounter, we find an escalating cycle of mistrust between the Board and CE, together with a sense of mutual alienation between the Board and those working on the shop floor. A pattern begins to grow of CEs increasingly shading the accuracy of what they tell boards, and boards responding by becoming suspicious of the information they are getting, leading to their questioning the CE's performance. An escalating cycle ensues, wherein the CE's reports become increasingly self-protective, thereby inviting increasingly rigorous oversight (interrogation) by the Board – reinforcing the CE's self-protective behaviour and non-disclosure of uncomfortable information to the Board.

Ramifications of this struggle are felt throughout the organisation, and often further afield – by service users, funders and wider community members. From our experience, there is usually a general sense of powerlessness and frustration, with the blame attributed by all concerned to somebody else within the dynamic. From the CE's side of the experience, often only articulated after having left the position, bitter accusations are made of unclear expectations, blurred boundaries, unhelpful interrogations, unwanted interference and a failure of the Board to either understand or support their work. In reaction to such problems, Boards, whose members are typically recruited for their passion and support for the work of the organisation, often flounder, uncomfortable with the expectations of power and the oft expressed notion that they need to take responsibility. Usually this idea around responsibility is translated to mean that they need to 'step up' and take leadership from the top; i.e. that they need to fix

these problems and show, in the polite discourse of the sector, 'who's boss'.

For most people, serving on NGO boards is a way of contributing to the community. Uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the expectations cast on them, they retreat to prescribed corporatized roles, or resign to be replaced by someone who has 'governance experience'.

The Role of Consulting Expertise in Maintaining Carver-Type Structures

Carver-type governance structures are maintained by an emerging industry of capacity builders and NGO management consultants, determined to ensure that the model works. To a hammer every problem is a nail. In our observation: to the consultants every problem is a failure to adhere to the dictates of the model – the view is that respective roles need to be clearly defined and role boundaries properly adhered to. Perhaps because expertise is usually focused on everything apart from the essential premises that determine it, the attention of the consultancy industry built up around assisting NGOs is to help agencies accommodate the current systems rather than to critique the systems themselves. Proposed solutions to the problems are typically to do more of the same but harder.

Consultants will typically prescribe a set of strategies that will, for a short while, enable the organisation to re-adapt to the system. Firstly, we might expect some governance training for Board members and perhaps some management training for the CE to ensure that they know what is expected of their respective roles within the carefully constructed Carver model. Secondly, some strategic planning will be prescribed. This exercise may include the CE and

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key staff members, and perhaps important people outside the organisation, to set or refresh the organisation's overall purpose and vision (within the established constraints of its constitution) and to chart some rather idealised statement of goals, outcomes,

mission, visions and values. Thirdly, staff are asked to hold a 'team building' day, reinforcing the fiction that the problem is a function of the personalities, not the structure. A common outcome, agreed to by both board members and staff, is to build stronger relationships and get to know each other better. Well-meaning plans involving lunches, get-togethers, or selected staff attending the first half-hour of Board meetings are often mooted but, after an initial bout of enthusiasm, are seldom followed through.

We have seen and been part of quite some number of such exercises. We have felt the initial guilt at our part in creating the problem, and with renewed energy and clarity have re-committed to the organisation and people we work alongside. What this oft-played scenario misses of course is that the problems are created by the constraining structure and power plays set in place by the Carver governance model rather than deficits of personality or role clarity.

How Did the Carver Governance Model Become the Common Management Modus Operandus for New Zealand NGOs?

We identify two reasons why the Carver model has been adopted so widely in the NGO world in New Zealand. Firstly, it is a reaction against the limitations of collective and consensus based approaches that were quite common in New Zealand in the 1970s. Secondly, it is an adaptive response to the prevailing neo-liberal political and social dominance of the last thirty-five years. The adaption has occurred at both the practical level of accessing funding, and the more subtle level of a broader societal shift away from collective approaches in favour of individualised and competitive understandings of the world (Apple, 1991; Kenkel, 2005; Marshall, 1995; Myers, 2004).

Perspectives on Context and History

The shift from the collective and consensus based approaches of the 1970s and 1980s to the dominance of corporate management and governance models, such as Carver's approach, in the 21st century reflects a significant shift in what is commonly understood to be normal, ordinary and proper in terms of how people should live and how agencies should organise themselves.

Looking back, we now see that there were two important and co-existing influences, or strands of thinking, in the sector in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Firstly, there was a deep desire on the part of many activists to resist oppressive social structures, and a refusal to replicate these structures in the activist organisations we were establishing. One consequence was to prefer consensus based approaches to making decisions. This required a high level of commitment, involved a large amount of time spent talking, and a pace of decision-making that in today's world would seem appallingly inefficient.

Secondly, the beginnings of a neo-liberal economic and social revolution centred around a call for increased freedom of choice, rewarding so-called excellence, and the right/duty of responsible individuals and groups to take charge of their own lives and destinies. As well as economic reform, neo-liberalism promised to create a more expansive and efficient social and economic environment in which the diverse and previously oppressed would have a chance to thrive.

As we moved into the late 1980s and early 1990s, the tensions between these strands of thinking became apparent. While activists focused on what is now often described as identity politics, neo-liberal politicians and business leaders seized control of the economic environment in which activists were required to fight their battles (Edwards, 2009). To take effective action, or exist at all, community organisations were required to engage with an environment increasingly dominated by neo-liberal notions such as competitive tendering, efficiency, and the self-motivated, adaptable and responsible individual (and group) as the ideal citizen (Prestidge, 2010).

This was also the era in which new public management and managerialism began its climb to dominance. Effective management was presented as the application of a set of functional skills and processes that could be learnt. Commitment to the organisation's cause, or deep understanding of the subject area was not necessary to be an effective manager; in fact such commitment and understanding might get in the way of rational, detached decision-making. This managerial way of thinking challenged the unwieldy legacy of collective organising and consensus decision-making.

The collectivist model was not without its own set of problems. From our experiences in such organisations, we are both well aware of the traps of the tyranny of structurelessness (Freeman, 1970). A glacial pace in decision-making and unclear protocols of authority often led to what could seem both an endless talkfest and politics by personality.

The Carver governance model offered a seductive alternative to the challenges of consensus based approaches. As opposed to the ill-defined operations of collectivism, the Carver approach offered an overt structure for decision-making and the exercise of power within the organisation. It also focused attention on the policy and purpose of the organisation, rather than the personalities involved in the organisation.

We suspect that the shift to the Carver approach was not a deliberate abandonment of ideals of collective action; rather it was a pragmatic response to a changing social and political paradigm. In retrospect

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we were willing participants in a slow slide from social activism to service delivery. In our rush to adopt a new approach that seemed both to solve intractable problems of endless talk paralysis, and to render us fit to function in the new environment, we solved one set of structural problems by introducing another set of structural problems.

Different Problems, Similar Causal Explanations – Behaviour and Structure

From the perspective of 2015, there is something to be learned from looking back on the inside experience of those early days of sitting in endless meetings vainly attempting to achieve consensus, just as there is something to be learned now from looking at the experience of sitting in so many board meetings watching CEs struggle under the earnest inquisitorial gaze of well-meaning Board members.

What we notice is that, while typical organisational problems are different under the consensus model and the Carver approach, attempts

to explain both sets of problems are strikingly similar. In both situations, problems are described as individualised fault or group failure rather than a failure or function of the structure itself. Back then, a deadlocked failure to achieve consensus or factional infighting was usually attributed to personal immaturity and/or a lack of commitment to 'working things through' (code words for more talking). Now, when a Board and CE may be locked into a climate of suspicion and caution, the situation is usually attributed to a lack of role clarity, unclear expectations, insufficient mechanisms for accountability reporting and poor boundaries between governance and management.

Typically the solution is to insist on greater rigour and allegiance to the models – be they models of collective consensus or the more hierarchal Carver approach. Sadly the solution becomes to do more of the same harder – not to examine critically underlying principles or models.

Perhaps why Freeman's (1970) insightful critique of the tyranny of structurelessness still resonates with such authority is her clear recognition that structures tend to determine people's group behaviour rather than people's behaviour determining structure. In our opinion, we in New Zealand's community development world have failed to undertake the same sort of rigorous critique of what now seems an unquestioned norm of how NGOs should arrange the internal conduct of their affairs. We believe this uncritical acceptance of an organisational model operates as a dangerous blind spot in today's NGO world, and is particularly incongruous for community development agencies that pride themselves on promoting inclusive, democratic ways of working.

Neo-liberalism, Community Development and the Shift of Norms

To review and extend some key points above: pragmatic considerations and the demands of a new political climate operated together to institutionalise the Carver governance model as the most efficient model for NGOs. Any losses of collective action over this thirty-year ascendancy of neo-liberalism and the Carver model could be considered accidental (or necessary) collateral damage. Alternatively, these losses could be considered as fine examples of hegemony in action: ideals of collective action, solidarity and consensus in the face of oppression are

made to seem faintly ridiculous and are supplanted by the gods of efficient delivery. What is particularly poignant for us is that agencies that exist with the express purpose of promoting community collectivity, connection and democracy at the micro level, unquestioningly adopt internal modes of organisation that seem to represent and embody the antithesis of their purpose.

Margaret Tennant (2007), in her history of the community sector in New Zealand, describes the way a number of community organisations took on neo-liberal norms. Such organisations changed their structure to Carver-style approaches with governance boards, CEs, and workers separated by distinct boundaries around role definitions, tasks and communication protocols. Typically, at the same time, they developed strategic plans, mission statements and marketing plans. These activities were encouraged by government-employed community development advisors (of which we were part) and consultants, with a view to gain government contracts. At the time we did not appreciate the impact of our work; that we were inadvertently active in re-shaping the community sector to fit the neo-liberal model.

With regard to that new shape, a number of authors assert that wherever the neo-liberal project touches the social sphere certain philosophical norms, tenets and ways of being in the world are strongly asserted in ways both subtle and overt (Marshall, 1995; Rose, 1999). These are norms that in a Foucaultian sense are governmental and normative (Burchell, Gordon and Miller, 1991), in that they are instructively productive – they produce or create ways of being, ways of understanding, and ways of acting in the world. Under this regime of the self we are all, or 'should' be, entrepreneurs of our own fate. Success (or failure) is understood as a function of personal effort and ability rather than a reflection of privilege, advantage or luck of position (Duttons and Collins, 2004; Packer, 2004). We believe this neo-liberal understanding does not fit well with a community development ethos that sees people and their capacity to choose as embedded in social context, and that understands agency and the power to create change in society as a collective, rather than an individual, function.

As Tennant (2007) asserts, community agencies are not immune from these neo-liberal dictates or tropes of hyper-responsibility (Rose, 1999). Agencies

are encouraged by funding structures and compliance requirements to position themselves as able to create their own futures in the marketplace via the adroit use of well-crafted strategic plans and vision statements administered by corporatized management structures.

On a positive note, many authors and practitioners have become wise to the ways the inherent hyper-individuation of the global neo-liberal project fractures community and diminishes belonging and connection. These thinkers and practitioners have proposed many useful approaches to countering neo-liberalism's effect on communities and to increasing democracy and connection at a local level (Ife, 2013; Rose, 1998). However this wise analysis has not, in our opinion, extended sufficiently into the intimate business of examining how well our structures of governance reflect our ideals.

> **Do not impose solutions; instead ask questions and take the time to listen without attempting to impose too much order and structure on what emerges.**

We wonder if the thirty year reign of neo-liberalism and the prevalence of new public management have pushed other options for conducting and governing our own affairs so far to the edge of consideration that they are either simply unheard of, or if faintly remembered, not seen as viable possibilities in today's harsh competitive world. With this possibility in mind, we are strongly of the opinion that the dominance of the Carver model, presented as the only sensible possibility, and the dominance of neo-liberalism as a philosophy for living, reflect a cultural entanglement that the community development world urgently needs to explore. A beginning examination of the influence of neo-liberalism on 'who-we-now-are' as a sector will, we hope, form our next journal paper.

Wider Community Impact

Consistent with its neo-liberal, market-based context, the Carver model has re-shaped the relationship between community organisations and the wider communities in which they are located. We have noticed three aspects to this change. The first is the loss of community influence in the direction and operation of community organisations as they take on a Carver-type governance structure. Second, 'community' has been relegated to the market place, with community organisations framed as providers of services in the market. The third aspect is the consequential impact on the community networks and informal relationships that weave strong communities. We hope to explore these problematic aspects in future journal papers.

Looking Forward and Personal Thoughts

In the first burst of enthusiasm when we decided to write this paper, we naïvely thought that we would simply develop or find an alternative to the Carver governance model: one that would be both democratic and efficient. Seduced by the lure of the silver bullet solution, we imagined structures in which solidarity and democracy might easily flower despite the coldness of the surrounding ground.

We did not find, nor have we invented, an organisational structure to supplant Carver as the premier model for the NGO and community development sector. We no longer think that our task is simply to invent or propose new models. While we started with a premise that the Carver governance model was the unspoken (and unspeakable) problem, we now regard it as a manifestation of a deeper problem: the neo-liberal project and the pervasive, taken-for-granted ways of thinking and acting that it engenders.

As we wrote and dialogued, we grew increasingly aware of how thoroughly we have been swamped by the insidious messages and memes of neo-liberalism. In comparing our current activities with our activist pasts we encountered a painful and sobering recognition of the extent to which our norms, expectations and pace now reflect the neo-liberal world around us.

We became aware that if we had rushed to a solution we would have been obedient to norms of 'efficiency at all costs' rather than expressing our dearly held values. We are now convinced that before action we first need to seek understanding. We have become convinced that as a sector we need to find ways to begin, together, the painful task of exploring the nature of our mutual entanglements with the neo-liberal project. We need to know what paths a thirty-five year history of neo-liberalism has pushed us down before we can chart a new direction effectively.

We argue that we need to re-engage in the process of conscientisation (Friere, 1972), which somehow has fallen out of fashion in these busy, goal-focused times. This would mean beginning together as a broad sector the process of exploring and making visible the oppressive effects of a generation's worth of neo-liberal thinking, certainties and structures on the intimacy of our relationships in the workplace.

We find ourselves returning to some of the central tenets of good community development practice to guide us. Do not impose solutions; instead ask questions and take the time to listen without attempting to impose too much order and structure on what emerges.

In the meantime, let us reclaim the passion and purpose that motivates us as community development practitioners. As we embark on the journey of unpacking our association with neo-liberalism, let us also reclaim ways of working that are congruent with our values. Remember that the work we do is more important than the organisations we work for. Let's work together in real ways, informed by and responsive to our communities.

And, if we revert to a Carver model because it is an easy – or sometimes in the current climate, the only possible – template to apply, at least we will do so consciously and with consideration of its effects.

Kia kaha, Kia manawanui

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