

Book Review

Mel D. Gill

Governing for Results: A Director's Guide to Good Governance

Victoria, BC: Trafford, 2005

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Having been a member of well over a dozen boards of various types and with a wide range of responsibilities including direct operational control, financial oversight and advisory functions, I have experienced a number of different initiations into the procedures and practices of a Board of Directors (sometimes known as a Board of Trustees). In a few instances, participation was premised on a handshake and a brief oration in which the main point was to set the date and time of the next meeting; in others, no less than seven thick binders containing exhaustive documentation of the policies and procedures of the board as well as descriptions of the proper practice of board members was set out in tortuous detail. Neither extreme was especially efficacious: the first provided no helpful guidance because no information of value was passed on; the second provided no helpful guidance because too much information of no value was passed on and, consequently, six of the binders remained unread.

In addition, over the years I have grown sceptical of the utility of "How to ..." guides to organizational conduct. Such tomes — most often produced "in house" — frequently contain useful information, but they also tend to convey a "political agenda" that is sometimes thinly veiled and sometimes blatant. While such books and pamphlets allow new directors (or senior administrators of various sorts) to negotiate a novel environment, familiarize themselves with the organization's "mission," and get a first impression of its internal ideology and preferred rhetorical style, "real life" quickly intrudes and the new functionary quickly learns that all is not what it seems to be. Accordingly, I approached Mel Gill's little volume with some suspicion.

Mr. Gill comes to the task with sturdy credentials. University studies in political science, psychology, economics and social work indicate a decent academic background. As well, seventeen years in a responsible position with the Saskatchewan public service dealing largely with NGOs, and his current work as President of Synergy Associates, a governance and organizational development consultancy provide evidence of success in both the public and private sectors. Translating experience into eloquent evocations of excellence between book covers, however, remains an uncertain task. Mel Gill's work shows that he is up to it.

Knowing that, in some cases, you can know a book by its cover, I was immediately aware of its relatively low or, at least, non-traditional "production values." Published or, more accurately, printed on a 216 mm x 279mm paper (that is the standard 8½ by 11 inch for the metrically challenged), this 181 page volume is unpretentious; upon opening it, however, it is unusually well-designed, surprisingly good looking and unconventionally easy to read.

More important than the style, however, is the substance. Mel Gill is a man with both academic and practical experience in and exposure to the moods and machinations of the public, private

and non-governmental sectors. It is his capacity to deal with the latter that make this an especially helpful guide to good governance, for NGOs, despite their prolificity, merit more consideration than they normally receive in discussions of organizational design and function. Mr. Gill is aware of the many different kinds of organizations and sensitive to the different needs that must be addressed depending on whether a director is expected to concentrate on such specialized roles as policy planning, fiscal stewardship, personnel management, performance monitoring or public advocacy. With these and other areas of responsibility, he outlines concisely what is expected of competent directors who wish to fulfill their mandates and meet their obligations to discharge their duties of due diligence, loyalty and care. He also provides an abundance of boxed “quick tips” and “case studies” to illustrate concretely the concepts he is putting forward and the points he wishes to make.

In language that is “accessible” without being patronizing, Gill provides a genuinely useful document that is comprehensive without being ponderous and detailed without being turgid. If I have any fault to find it is that a few (a very few) topics of importance are given relatively short shrift. These include the legal status of not-for-profit organizations that are of increasing importance as both private and public bureaucracies shrink in size and in public estimation. Increasingly controversial areas such as the occasionally intrusive character of some “charities” as well as government bodies empowered to care for mentally incapable persons (public guardians and trustees) require more than ordinary examination and supervision. Likewise, private institutions that exercise public roles (such as elementary and secondary schools) require growing levels of public oversight to ensure compliance with public policy as well as appropriate standards of fiscal control. As well, politically sensitive organizations from trade unions to policy advocates do not receive the special attention they might warrant. Finally, the ways to avoid debilitating conflicts are examined in some detail, but conflict management and crisis resolution are not. So, a person who has, for example, uncritically accepted the advice of a CEO and is then astonished to receive a delegation of disgruntled workers is placed in what might generously be called an uncomfortable position. Instructions on to dig oneself out of such a hole are not adequately provided.

This is not, of course, to say that Gill’s ample information and advice are not relevant (as someone with experience teaching parliamentary procedure to trade union executives, I was particularly pleased to see a brief summary of Robert’s Rules of Order included in this book); rather, it is to mention that organizations dedicated to social change occasionally encounter problems in addition to those treated at greater length by Mel Gill.

For most established service providers, training institutions, development agencies and the like, the needs of directors are well met and, to be fair, Gill supplies excellent and up-to-date print and electronic resources to meet specialized requirements of the sort that I have mentioned.

It is, of course, unseemly to criticize writers for failing to do what they had not intended to do in the first place; so, let me be the first to put the previous quibble in its place by saying that the book Gill intended to write has been well written and broadly successful. I hesitate to say that any book is a “must read”, for if everyone read all the books thus described in their field of activity or expertise, there would be little time left for action. Still, for people who sit on Boards of Directors — either freshly appointed or as longstanding participants — this is certainly a volume that should be purchased, pondered and kept close at hand until its contents have become “second nature” to the reader, as they seem to be to Mel Gill.

About the Author

Howard A. Doughty has been a director/trustee of the The Kellett Group (publishing consultants), the John Howard Society of Metropolitan Toronto, the Richmond Hill Public Library, the Coalition of Richmond Hill Ratepayers, the Ontario Public Service Employees Union Local 560, and numerous other organizations. He teaches philosophy at Seneca College in King City, Ontario.