

JOHN CARVER - SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND THE POLICY GOVERNANCE® MODEL

Larry Spears: How can Servant-Leadership help boards and board members to encounter their weaknesses, and then help to heal and overcome them?

John Carver: Whether Servant-Leadership plays a role in helping heal whatever's going on within a board...I've never quite thought of it that way...but when I stop to think of it, perhaps there are ways. For example, the model focuses people on the conflict of issues, as opposed to the conflict of people. Let me explain:

Policy Governance is a counsel to boards to see themselves as present at the board table to disagree, not present to agree. If they're there to agree, we only need one person, and we can pass the board job around: George is the board in February and Sally is the board in March. We have them together to disagree. We don't ever have them to disagree just to the extent of the board members' disagreements. They come together to bring the disagreement and the variety of opinions of an ownership, so if in fact, an ownership point of view is not actually held by one of the board members, it should still find expression in the board process. For the board to really do its job in being a servant to the ownership, and then let that turn into the leadership of that which the ownership owns, the organization, it must incorporate things that go beyond the small-mindedness of George and Sally disagreeing. It's bigger than that. That bigness helps get out of the person-to-person kind of confrontation. It's more a confrontation of ideas, so "let's be about it".

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Larry Spears: Robert Greenleaf talked a lot about characteristics of Servant-Leadership. One of them was foresight. What is your sense of the use of foresight within a board context?

John Carver: Foresight is not just one of the characteristics of a board, it is almost the total engagement of a board. The board should be dealing with the future, and a future as far out as makes sense, for example, the board of a nuclear power plant shouldn't be dealing with a five-year future. The board of a small counselling agency might in fact be dealing with a five- or ten-year future.

Foresight is really what the game is all about with a board. The board is there to envision and create a future, **not** to go over last month's financial statements. There are other ways of handling that. To create a future, foresight is that which plays the "what if" game over and over. What if this happened? What if that happened? Is the nature of the world around us changing such that what was not a risk before, is now a risk?

The idea of vision and grasping the bigness of the world that the organization is moving into. For example, our petroleum companies should have boards which deal with the fact that certain kinds of operations of ours, should they go wrong, can cause untold damage; damage which might in fact be as great as the total capitalization of our company. Maybe that wasn't even true twenty years ago, but now it is true. So what are we going to do with that? How will we guide this organization, not only on behalf of the owners which we must do, but with an ethical obligation to the rest of the world. Now that takes foresight to the point that it strains imagination that we could even **have** that much foresight, but that is exactly what is called for.

That's what's called for - for the public schools, for relief agencies, city governments, (who don't usually have the foresight to talk about the fact that their infrastructure falls apart a little bit more every year, and our accounting is not such that we're laying aside, amortizing in such a way to take care of that.)

Foresight is so important that I would say is the main job of the board.

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Larry Spears: Another characteristic of Service-Leadership is listening. What aspects of Policy Governance help to encourage greater fealty to listening?

John Carver: It is impossible to govern with excellence without having a huge investment in listening. First of all, listening to the ownership. That's where the listening begins.

We have in Policy Governance a term we often use called “Ownership Linkage”, which simply speaks to the obligation of a board to connect itself to the ownership in some way. Sometimes if you have a small ownership you can actually connect to the individual people; you can survey them, you can have them all in the same room.

If you have thousands, or hundreds of thousands, or millions of owners, as many organizations do, like equity corporations (or even non-profits), then the listening has to be done another way. It has to be done in some way that has statistical validity so you are not just listening to the loud voices or the voices that your board members connect with best, but **broader** listening. So the listening almost has to be taken to a technological level of listening.

How do you find out what the values are of 100,000 people are about public education, if you are a school board? Well, that’s your job. Figure it out. And the listening must be done in a very careful statistically accurate way in order to have the confidence that you have actually heard. So that’s part of it.

The other kind of listening is that boards have to listen to their staffs. I don’t mean listen to their staffs in the sense of being pushed around by them, or giving up their obligation to make decisions on behalf of the owners (not let the staffs make the decisions on behalf of the owners) at the top level of decision-making. But to listen to the wisdom that resides there, because staff have a tremendous amount of wisdom that the board can draw on, not to give up its role, but to enhance its role.

Listening plays a big part in governance. It has to. Boards should probably spend more time listening than talking.

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Larry Spears: You spoke some years ago about the Policy Governance model as a kind of technology of Servant-Leadership. Would you share some insights about this?

John Carver: Servant Leadership is a way of being, not a set of behaviours. It is translated into behaviour, but that behaviour will look different in a classroom by a teacher vs. in a boardroom by a board vs. in an accounting office by a clerk. One does different things out of the Servant Leadership way of being.

Policy Governance is a technology of Servant Leadership in a specific location, the governing board. So, in a sense, Policy Governance is a technology, or a technique, or a “concretization” of Servant Leadership in a very specific setting.

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Larry Spears: The Policy Governance model has been around for thirty years or more. Have you adjusted the model in some way over the years, and if so, how?

John Carver: The Policy Governance model has had a history of development over thirty years. The model basically consists of a handful of principles. The principles themselves have stayed pretty much unchanged during that time. However, the ability to translate the principles into action, for example, to design a way of getting monitoring information from a staff so that a board can feel reasonably secure that what it has set forth as what it wanted done or what it wanted avoided has in a reasonable interpretation been achieved, the monitoring process.

We’ve gotten much more exacting about the monitoring process. The principle about boards only monitoring about what they’ve given a criteria about ahead of time, that you only make judgments when people have the chance to know ahead of time upon which the judgment will be made, and so forth; those principles have stayed the same.

The model itself has gone virtually unchanged and has stood the test of time, but the implementation techniques and the learning about how sometimes it is very difficult in implementation [continues to develop].

Link to video: <https://m.youtube.com/watch?t=178s&v=oGusoyovf18>

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