



Columinate

Catalysts for Common Good

Reimagining Your Board's Work

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"Replacing ingrained habits isn't necessarily easy, but we know it's possible with clear intention, useful tools, and good replacement habits."

Have you ever felt like your board is in a rut? Maybe it seems that all you do at meetings is hear reports about operational or committee activities. Or maybe you notice that your board engages in robust dialogue during your day-long retreats, but your monthly meetings seldom include this sort of conversation. Maybe you have begun to wonder what value you—individually or collectively—are adding to the organization.

Well, you're not alone. Other boards have fallen into similar patterns, and some have intentionally worked to change their habits. Here are a handful of ideas and resources that have helped other boards reimagine their work:

Three modes of board work

One place to start is with understanding the three different modes of board work:

- **fiduciary (oversight);**
- **strategic (planning for and making decisions about the future); and**
- **generative (building new knowledge and wisdom).**

My colleague Leslie Watson's article, [Building Board Capacity to Lead Through Multimodal Governance](#), offers a good summary of this concept. If you're interested and have time, you might enjoy reading the book from which Leslie's article is derived: [Governance as Leadership](#). This book made the rounds of food co-op boards a few years back, and I learned a lot from it. The central idea of the book is that high-functioning boards attend to these three modes of work: fiduciary, strategic, and generative.

Sometimes, getting "unstuck" is a matter of changing habits—for example, spending less board time on the fiduciary/oversight work and more time on the generative/learning work. Can you imagine reducing the amount of time you spend talking about monitoring reports or operational details, while increasing the amount of time you devote to learning about your community's needs or your industry or demographic and economic trends that might affect your community or your organization?

Conversations with community leaders

Some boards that I have worked with have made a decision to dedicate time at many (or even most) board meetings for conversations with other leaders in their community. One board has, over the past year or so, invited executive directors or other representatives of local non-profit organizations to every board meeting, inviting a different organization each time. The board listens "leader to leader," trying to understand the needs of their community and how the co-op's work might or might not relate to that other organization's work.

Rather than non-profit leaders, one board that I know of invited business and political leaders into their meetings. This was part of an intentional six-month focus on strategic planning. The board and the general manager (GM) participated together in these conversations, and they made sure that they all understood roles and responsibilities in advance of this learning cycle. The GM was still responsible for the strategic plan; the board was building knowledge and understanding of the community landscape as a way to gauge whether the strategic plan was reasonable. As a team, they wanted other leaders in the community to understand that the co-op was an important contributor to the health of the community.

John Carver is the person who developed the Policy Governance operating system that many boards use. In [John Carver on Board Leadership](#), you can find the article, "Is Your Board in a Rut? Shake Up Your Routine!" The article includes suggestions such as: devote an entire meeting to a "what if" session; go as a group to observe another board; and ask a futurist to address the board on topics relevant to your mission. Can you imagine this sort of conversation as the centerpiece of one of your board meetings?

You might notice a through line in all the suggestions so far: most board work happens in board meetings. If we want to reimagine the board, we are really reimagining board *meetings*. With that in mind, here are additional resources that might help you rethink the sorts of conversations you are having in your meetings:

- [Asking Powerful Questions: Co-op boards open possibilities through conversation](#)
- [Deliberative Improvements: Facilitation Techniques for Meeting Success](#)

Cooperative Board Leadership Development (CBLD)

Finally, you might consider using more CBLD resources as a regular part of board learning. Our Columinate team has developed some great resources based on what we've seen would be useful to boards that are enrolled in the program. For example, the webinar series, [Explorations in Policy Governance](#), includes a workshop on "Policy Governance Puzzles." That workshop will include more specific suggestions for how to shake off some of the habits that can get in the way of performing at our best.

What if each director agreed to participate in at least one [workshop, webinar, Co-op Café, or Academy course](#), and then teach the rest of the board, at the next board meeting, what they learned? One part of the whole-board conversation might be answering the question: How might we make use of this learning to help us be even better at our role? Many groups, not just boards, find that the focus on continuous improvement is energizing and exciting.

How can your board organize yourselves for this work? First, don't overcomplicate it! Start by making a general agreement that this sort of generative work matters. Identify your top goals and/or topics for learning in your board's annual work plan. Then assign an individual who can take the lead in reaching out to and scheduling speakers, or assign each director a month when they will teach the board what they learned from a CBLD workshop. Your board chair can incorporate these speakers or assignments into monthly meeting agendas. At the end of your cycle of learning, and before planning the next cycle, assess what you've learned, what new areas of inquiry your learning has inspired, and how you want to share what you've learned with your co-op's member-owners.

Boards and board leaders who want to reimagine the work don't need to do everything mentioned in this article. And you don't have to wait until you are in a rut to reimagine the work. Replacing ingrained habits isn't necessarily easy, but we know it's possible, especially if we have clear intentions, useful tools, and good replacement habits. You can pick a way to start that seems right for you, and then just start. The path becomes more clear as you walk it.

