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Snippet #146 Governance Demystified

Governance is a sophisticated word for a simple concept. It's the system by which any group of people manages itself.

The best way to describe governance is to look at one of its simplest forms – the family. Each one has its own set of circumstances, such as parents (there might be one or two, biological or step, of different or the same gender) or siblings (or not).

Stories abound about households where the father was the final authority, or perhaps only thought he was but the mother was actually in charge. Were there house rules, such as who was responsible to take out the trash, walk the dog, do the dishes? That authority and responsibility dynamic is the essence of family governance. No single arrangement is perfect for every family, and successful governance has to be based on the structure of the family itself. What works for one won't necessarily work for another, a concept often recognized by mothers in responding to an assertion that "Suzie's mother is letting *her* go to the movie!" by saying "I'm not Suzie's mother."

By contrast, associations are created in response to a need – there's a mission to be fulfilled that might be social, educational or professional. The initial members make certain decisions about the structure that will best help advance the mission. These decisions are complicated because there are a lot more people involved than in the average family structure, and they come from different backgrounds with different perceptions of how things should be organized.

Associations are governed by a group collectively called a board and, although there may be legal requirements for the minimum size, there's no maximum. Deciding on the right size for the board may be the most important governance decision. Beware if you hear that there's one "right" size for a board, or one "best practice" – what's right or best depends completely on the mission and culture of the association, not on what has worked for someone else. While a governance model may work well in another situation, the decision must include an examination of the differences in circumstances and the likelihood of a similar outcome – something that the mother in the earlier example was quick to recognize.

Governance is the allocation of authority and responsibility among an organized group of unrelated people, and is sometimes described using words that identify the primary influencers, such as member-driven, board-driven, or staff-driven. A governance structure that works well for a strongly staff-driven association usually will fail miserably in a member-driven association.

The fundamental decisions about the structure and flow of authority in the organization, are codified in the bylaws. The bylaws are the result of governance decisions, not the driver of those decisions.