

The Learning Board

By Michael G. Daigneault
CEO of Quantum Governance, L3C

I've been thinking a lot lately about the idea of building a culture of learning among nonprofit Boards and about how such a culture might just be the salve to a number of nonprofit challenges. I've been a serial learner most of my life. In fact, I drive my wife and colleagues crazy lugging multiple iPads, books, articles and videos around with me wherever I go. I have a book recommendation for nearly everyone that crosses my path. I'm such a space nut that I attended adult space camp ("adult" perhaps being a relative term) at the tender age of 35 – to train on the actual simulators that NASA astronauts used in years gone by – because I was curious to learn what it was like to fly the Space Shuttle. Call me a learning geek.

As it happens, twenty-five years ago, Peter Senge, an American systems scientist and a senior lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management, suggested the benefits of becoming a "learning organization." A learning organization is one that has developed a culture that actively encourages leaders, managers and employees to "continuously acquire, transfer and create new knowledge." Senge's thesis was applauded when it emerged, but for many large corporations and institutions to actually become a continuous learning organization was an overwhelming and daunting challenge. The personal computer and internet were still in their infancy. (To give it some historical context, it was the same year "www" was proposed for universal use on the web, and the Apple computers at the time were the Macintosh Classic and the Lisa. We would have to wait yet another 11 years for the first generation iPod!)

I'd like to suggest that Senge was right in his appraisal of what needed to happen, but seriously ahead of his time. The digital and conceptual environment of today had to be born to enable his vision of a learning organization to genuinely flourish.

That day has urgently arrived for nonprofits.

Today's nonprofit faces a particularly challenging, rapidly changing and unpredictable landscape. The cycle times for new products and services have become extremely compressed. Entrepreneurial disrupters can go from an idea to having a major impact on the programmatic and services landscape in just months or years. With ever-increasing regulatory complexities, consolidation, evolving board governance practices, exploding technologies, the quickly changing needs and expectations of your constituency and increasing community demands on nonprofit leaders have become greater than ever. This is your moment...you can allow the challenges to overcome you, or you can overcome the challenges. It is vital that that your Board and Senior Management identify key trends, changes and developments quickly – appreciate the implications of such shifts quickly – and courageously help your nonprofit to adapt quickly. Why the rush? Simply put - the world won't wait for you. It will change at its own pace...nonprofits will have to work very hard to just keep up, let alone "get to the future first!"

How can your leadership ensure that it: (1) is genuinely aware of the critical changes taking place; (2) deeply appreciate the implications of such changes; (3) be able to meaningfully partner with management to craft strategies that respond to key shifts and needs; and (4) do so in an economic climate that demands speed and effective execution of vital strategic choices?

Indeed, one of the most important strategic challenges facing nearly all nonprofits today is how to individually and collectively learn the changes that are taking place around them, ask the hard questions that need to be asked, strategically experiment, capture the learning from such experiments and innovate rapidly enough to ensure their relevance for years to come.

I am convinced that a genuine commitment to be a modern-day “learning organization” led by a “learning board” will help your nonprofit better understand, successfully innovate and rapidly adapt to the swiftly changing world that surrounds it.

But, what do I mean when I say you should build a learning organization and Board? And, where do you begin? There are three key building blocks for any nonprofit leader seeking to foster a learning culture:

1. A Supportive Learning Environment. First, you will need to make a conscious decision – nonprofit-wide – that you are dedicated to building an learning organization. It takes a commitment of time, energy and resources. And not just from your Board members. Your organization’s senior management team will surely be required to contribute and, often, they will play an active role in helping Board members access key learning resources.
2. A Concrete Learning Process. There are a number of helpful resources available to support your efforts. Certainly there are a number of important doors to ongoing learning, training and conferences. Be specific about your nonprofit’s expectations concerning active learning for its Board members. Outline initial and ongoing requirements for Board members, and don’t forget to include senior management and your employees in the fold. Include an assessment of your own and your employees’ commitment to learning as a part of your annual evaluation processes.
3. Leadership that Reinforces Learning. Lastly, and most importantly, your commitment to learning must come from the top-down – demonstrated overtly from both the Board and the senior management team. At my own organization, my staff knows how important ongoing learning is to me. While space camp may have been a dream for me, I do ensure that we regularly include key questions, strategic ideas and even provocative book discussions on the agendas for every one our quarterly team meetings...



Michael Daigneault serves as Chief Executive Officer at Quantum Governance, L3C and has more than 30 years of experience in the field of governance, management, strategy, planning and facilitation. With more than 70 percent of Quantum Governance's representing the nonprofit sector, the organization fields more engagements in that community than in any other.

Quantum Governance provides nonprofits, corporations, credit unions, associations and governmental entities with strategic, cost-effective governance, ethics and management consulting, facilitation and evaluation. We are home to more strategic governance experience than any other practice in the country. The firm is a unique L3C organization that integrates the best elements of both the for- and non-profit communities into one practice. It is a low-profit, limited-liability service organization dedicated to the public good and one of the very first such legal hybrid organizations in the United States.