

Defining Board Governance

Key Finding:

There was no consensus among scholars regarding definitions of “governance.” The search revealed that it is difficult to find scholars’ working definition of “governance.” An interesting finding was the tension that exists between governance definitions that seek to define governance as a function or as the operations of the board and macro level definitions that see governance as a shared responsibility and the blurring boundaries of governance.

Within the literature the following definitions or concepts of governance exist:

- The term governance is rooted in Latin and means *to steer or to give direction*. (Cornforth 2010; Cornforth 2012)
- “A governance structure is defined here as a distinctive set or cluster of governance structures, responsibilities (functions) and processes (practices) that are logically consistent with one another.” (Gill 2001, p. 10)
- Gill (2001) also describes a working definition of governance as: “the processes, structures, and organizational traditions that determine how power is exercised, how stakeholders have their say, how decisions are taken and how decision-makers are held accountable.” (Gill 2001 p. 1)
- Stone and Ostrower (2007) simply describes governance as the operation of boards of directors. (p. 417)
- “Making collective decisions about important issues, including the purpose of collective action, strategies for achieving purpose, and oversight and accountability mechanisms.” (Hughes 2010 p.)
- Rooted in the study of public administration, Stoker (1998) posits that “governance refers to the development of governing styles in which boundaries between and within public and private sectors have become blurred.” (Stoker 1998 p. 17)
- Using an economic lens, Speckbacher suggests that “non-profit governance is about value creation and cooperation among stakeholders. The purpose of non-profit governance is to make cooperation efficient in order to maximize valuable contributions and to minimize destructive struggles such as power seeking.” (p. 298)
- Renz suggested that “boards” and “governance” were coinciding concepts. “The complexity of today’s problems has forced us to refocus our attention. The new concept of governance is about community leadership, networks and diffused power.” (Renz p. 2)
- Stone et al. 2010 suggest that governance exists within various levels of analysis including single or unitary organizations, inter-organizational networks, and whole societies or communities. (Stone et al. 2010)

- Bradshaw (2002) suggests that the governance function is an engagement in the politics of the organization at keeping the system adaptive and learning. (p. 476)
- Stoker's six propositions suggest that governance:
 - "Refers to a set of institutions and actors that are drawn from but also beyond government;
 - Identifies the blurring of boundaries and responsibilities of tackling social and economic issues;
 - Identifies the power dependence involved in the relationships between institutions involved in collective action;
 - Is about autonomous self-governing networks of actors;
 - Recognizes the capacity to get this done which does not rest on the power of government to command or use its authority.
 - It sees government as able to use new tools and techniques to steer and guide." (P. 18)

References:

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