

## **Ends that Make a Difference: Boldly Creating the Future**

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**ABSTRACT: I urge boards to leap beyond the simple matter of whether this or that is really an ends issue and move on to the real challenge: to set ever higher ends expectations. Boards spend far too much time fussing with the ends concept rather than using it. One of my reasons for constructing the Policy Governance model was to enable boards to powerfully and unrelentingly impel managerial performance. The preliminary requirement for that is to focus on the right things free of the clutter—which the ends-means concept enables. But for boards to demand doable, but increasingly extraordinary performance requires them to add the human elements of farsightedness, daring, and leadership.**

I have been asked each year by the International Policy Governance Association and, before that, by OnTarget Consulting to make a few comments . . . comments from the source, they are kind enough to say, but “from the horse’s mouth” might be a less ostentatious way to put it. At any rate, I have taken that chance each time to focus on my aspirations for Policy Governance and, in a broader sense, for the ability of human beings to better decide upon and fashion the actual achievements to which they are committed. I thank IPGA for having that opportunity yet again and want to share some thoughts about Ends with you.

What could be simpler than the ends concept? All organizations exist to make a difference. It should not be too much to ask that they know clearly *what difference they are to make, for whom they are to make it, and that the difference they make is worth what it costs*. What could be simpler than that?

Of course, we all know that simple and easy are not the same thing. Many things are simple in their expression, yet difficult to achieve. Pilot, we want the plane on the runway with the rubber parts down. Surgeon, we want a working kidney. Explorer, we want a new route to China. Researcher, we want a cure for cancer. We want the homeless in housing. We want the hungry well-fed. We want world peace. We want a person on the moon who returns safely to earth. We want a chicken in every pot.

Those aims are simply expressed, but by no means easy. Simplicity does not enable us to expect effortlessness. And difficulty in no way detracts from importance.

Yet we know that the ends concept, as simple, as powerful, and as intuitive as it is, has proven to be one of the most difficult aspects of the Policy Governance model, particularly for non-equity organizations. Counterfeits are so handily available and so respected by tradition that the simple notion of proclaiming our intended results for human needs gets lost in the clutter. What we do and how we do it commands our attention. Well-intended activities, brilliant techniques, impressive credentials easily blind us to the lack, type, or targeting of making a difference. Policy Governance provides boards an escape route from that all-too-human failing.

**One of my reasons for constructing the Policy Governance model was to enable boards powerfully and unrelentingly to impel management performance. The model itself is only a means, having little or no value except in what it enables people to accomplish. It rests on a few common-sense assumptions: If the results to be achieved are clear, if they are authoritatively stated, if it is clear who will be charged with accountability for their achievement, if the account-able party or**

**parties are given all the room they need to perform . . . then the conditions are optimal for maximum performance. That is, we maximize the probability for exceptional achievement.**

We can make the compelling case that when elements of ends—expected results for specified persons at acceptable cost—are isolated from all the clutter, the board can single-mindedly attend to its main job. We can make the case that a concept that combines effectiveness and efficiency into one thought saves us from trivial definitions of efficiency nonprofits and governmental organizations have been prone to. We can make these cases and we frequently do. I have myself been making them for the past 30 years.

For those of us who think the case for the Ends concept has been adequately made, we can frequently tire of the need to explain and defend it. Sometimes we just want to say, “For heaven’s sake, this has been out a long time now, go read the book!” But we must ourselves admit that explaining the Ends concept and understanding why it is important does not automatically lead to its profitable use.

For example, we hear a great deal of boards futzing about over ends. The nature of their futzing is commonly a back and forth tug over whether this or that issue should be classified as ends or means. If not that, then the struggle is whether the ends/means distinction makes any difference anyway. So picky board members and loose ones scuffle over whether the rules have to be followed *all* the time, as if once having settled on having a jet engine, we think it makes any sense whatsoever to debate the relative merits of metal versus wooden propellers. Has our insistence on such a revolutionary instrument as Policy Governance resulted in navel-gazing about the instrument? In actual practice, does the interminable to-do about ends become more a tussle over the tool than what the tool is meant to make possible?

So if a board actually does spend most of its energy on ends, what should we expect the consequences to be?

We would surely expect that the ends focus and the freedom from entanglement in staff means result in organizations that are more true to their owners’ wishes. We would expect that schools produce more learning for their cost. We would expect trade associations to yield more favorable circumstances for their members. We would expect municipal councils to produce municipal value more aggressively than their own political interests. We would expect companies to produce more shareholder value, unthreatened by risky and unethical behavior. We would expect arts organizations to increase the awareness and appreciation of the arts. We would expect, in the words adopted by the International Policy Governance Association, effective owner-accountable organizations.

So we must guard against couching our aspirations in terms of what familiar systems can do, even though doing so is often called being ‘realistic’. We have enough sense of history to know that new ideas are and must by definition not be the ‘real world’. And they are not . . . until they are. And when they are, someone has brought them about . . . someone who recognized that real world but was not blinded by it. Yet aren’t we all prone to this kind of blindness, one that is just another instance of ends driven by means as opposed to means driven by ends?

But bold ends—unrestricted by today’s means—require a leap of imagination. What a model can do is set the environment and process in which boards are not only enabled to spread their wings, but dared to do so. It is under such conditions that creativity and wisdom can produce miracles.

Where is the school board in North America that on serious reflection has decided that over the next 20 years, the percentage of students fluent in Mandarin Chinese will become no less than, say, 40%? In the

United States we still stumble around with English and Spanish. In Canada, the political argument has been about English and French. But looking back from the world of fifty years from now, those may not be the most relevant arguments for us to have engaged in at all. Do school boards really think the world of tomorrow will be like that of today? Do we really think we have reached the pinnacle of enlightenment by adding computer skills to our ends?

Or, for another example, some years ago in the United States, due to our shameful racial history, many were calling for highly controversial change. Little victories were met with great and understandable celebration. We fought for long overdue social changes toward equal access to public accommodation, desegregated schools, and color-blind employment practices. Those were and are valuable goals. Even achieving them painstakingly one at a time was cause for delight. But one voice stood out, calling for those things to be sure, but establishing a far bolder, more sweeping aspiration, one which could embrace the smaller steps, but fire the imagination and motivation beyond what then could feel in any way realistic—a society in which people would be judged not by the color of their skin, but the content of their character.

How many more possibilities for that kind of leadership are lying dormant in each of us today? How much leadership lies unexpressed in individuals around board tables and, even more to the point, how much could emerge from a properly focused, dynamic interaction of those individuals around those tables?

Our interest in governance must be fueled as much by those questions as by our pleasure in meticulously designed governance systems. We must ask whether the conditions for bold, imaginative ends leadership are coming to pass across the wide variety and enormous number of boards in the world.

Maybe it is too soon. But that is an uninspired claim that I hope we will not allow ourselves to get away with for too much longer. Still, maybe the human element has not yet plumbed the usefulness of the framework. Are school boards pushing the envelope about potential student achievement? Are social service boards reconsidering whether they are aiming high enough? Alas, perhaps they are not. Do boards use the model's grant of freedom from trivia and typical worries to forge ahead and unleash ambitious vision?

Are our boards, even our Policy Governance boards, doing that? Some probably are and we all have something to learn from them. But I fear that many are not. Some have responded to Policy Governance as a welcome relief from the old struggles, but not a stimulus to soar to new levels of excellence. Some find Policy Governance a better way to keep score, but keeping score can never substitute for aspiration and determination. Some discover Policy Governance makes sense out of a fossilized bureaucracy, but do not pull together the will to breathe new life into it or to demand nothing less than transformation. Peter Drucker, in a statement that can be applied to boards as well as to management, said that the promise of good system is that it enables ordinary people to do extraordinary things. But those ordinary people have to *want* to do extraordinary things.

The Policy Governance model itself isn't about far-sightedness, vision, and our ability to rise above ourselves. It is a framework that enables us to draw on those virtues, just as even the best of chisels were not the inspiration and talent that produced Michelangelo's *David*. A musical instrument has neither passion nor music. It is a device of physics, of overtone wavelengths and resonant frequencies. The musician produces the music.

That distinction was pointed out by a client of mine over fifteen years ago. Anne Saunier, who was at the time board chair for Planned Parenthood Federation of America and being mentioned as candidate

for presidency of the National Organization for Women, said she welcomed the model's being impersonal and analytical. Only if the machinery of governance is merely a well-crafted mechanism could it be a fitting and dispassionate vessel into which she and her colleagues could invest their own passion and zeal. I have had church boards say the same thing.

Make no mistake, dynamic servant-leadership and visionary governance calls for passion. Another client, Donna Chavez, one of the elected park commissioners in Naperville, Illinois, made the point that "passion, commitment, and fire for what we are doing must start at this table."

The board's ends work goes far beyond learning to speak a new language of results and beneficiaries, and costs. It must go far beyond exulting in a streamlined model that allows efficient use of board time and rigorous tracking of executive performance. By now we should be far beyond arguing about the ends concept—it is, frankly, too simple and too obvious for profitable dispute. Nietzsche is reputed to have said that when you teach people a new idea, they come to treat that idea as if it were old hat and accuse you of peddling platitudes! As irritating as that might seem, it is testimony to the utility and legitimacy of the new idea. I take some satisfaction in seeing that phenomenon occur with elements of Policy Governance that were seen as so radical thirty years ago.

And so it is that the ends concept, while by no means universally employed, has been out there long enough that we should think about turning more attention to how it is used. My point today as you enjoy yet another annual conference dedicated to governance that yields owner-accountable organizations is a simple one: It is that the central point of governance is not that boards bicker about the ends *concept*, but that knowledgeable and with servant-leader commitment they struggle about the ends *themselves* . . . vigorously, publicly, passionately, and certainly not least, *boldly*.

**Using the Policy Governance model as their structure for thinking and, more particularly, the ends concept as their framework for considering, debating, and deciding how the world is to be different, boards would be wise to go beyond learning why their organizations are doing this and that, for the ease of tailoring ends to fit what-is is so seductive. The only meritorious job is to cause what-is to fit the ends. And that can only be done by boards' commitment to deeply considering their world and what it could become.**

A familiar bromide urges us to think the unthinkable. And, without in any way pretending that reality imposes no limits, isn't it sad that the first thing many of us think upon hearing that wise counsel is that we must at all costs guard against being unrealistic! Every Policy Governance consultant has encountered the board member or executive whose first response to hearing about a new and, we think we can show, a better way, is to tell us that isn't the 'real world'. Perhaps at that point we should merely say, "Right! Now you are getting the idea!" But once boards have thought the unthinkable about their process of governance, then they encounter the need all over again with respect to the difference they choose to make in the world.

If we only set out to achieve what we already know how to do, another incisive observer has warned, then our achievements must forever be less than they might have been. Let me conclude this commentary on coupling of dreams with determination by the familiar statement of Robert Kennedy, who at least for our purposes here tonight, was speaking directly to governing boards: "There are those who look at things the way they are, and ask 'why' . . . I dream of things that never were, and ask 'why not?'"