

Policy Governance in New Zealand

by Sandy Brinsdon

I AM PLEASED TO report that the number of organizations aware of or already implementing Policy Governance in New Zealand is growing. This becomes obvious as conversations around governance issues regularly move toward Policy Governance. It is also referred to or embedded in many documents to support governance in New Zealand.

Here I share how Policy Governance made it to our shores and the influence it has, and continues to have, on many organizations within New Zealand. I also look at some of the challenges ahead.

New Zealand is a country of 4 million positioned in the southwestern corner of the Pacific Ocean. Its population is mainly of European descent, with indigenous Maori being the next largest group. New Zealand is founded on the Treaty of Waitangi, outlining rights and obligations for Maori and *Pakeha* (foreign settlers). It is a top-rated tourist destination and boasts spectacular scenery that has served as the backdrop for many films, including *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *The Last Samurai*. The local *sauvignon blanc* is exceptional, skiing and adventure sports are popular, and we have a genuine indigenous culture. We were first to split the atom, climb Mt. Everest, and give women the vote.

Around fifteen years ago, the first New Zealand-trained Policy Governance practitioners introduced this model to organizations. As with many other governance practitioners and boards, its comprehensiveness was what initially attracted us to the Policy Governance model. We were particularly taken with how it provided solutions to the major issues that boards globally struggle with: holism, definition of roles, and the purpose and value of boards. For many more people and organizations, it is also about gaining effi-

ciency and effectiveness in the boardroom by doing the right things better rather than the wrong things more efficiently, as can often happen.

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So how does Policy Governance fit into New Zealand's somewhat unique commercial and social sector environment? While we have the same range of national agencies and global and national corporations as in many other countries, New Zealand has a huge number of small businesses combined with a strong community delivery ethos and practice, and many of the nonprofit agencies have budgets well under US\$1 million. Therefore, many boards, trusts, and societies are delivering a raft of services covering, for example, health, the social sector, sports, and education, often with very few staff members (between one and five) and capacity issues. This poses challenges for agencies and seeking to work with Policy Governance. In particular, these groups need to see the relevance of the model and not reject it as relevant only for bigger agencies, or they often choose to use select parts, therefore missing the full impact the integrated model offers. Smaller agencies working in the community sector strug-

gle to acquire the support and resources needed to attend to their governance capacity issues.

New Zealand also has a unique constitutional foundation based on a treaty partnership with Maori. This relationship has enabled strong Maori organizations that are closely connected to the community and deliver a wide range of commercial and social outcomes. New Zealand also has a strong Pacific Island community, and Policy Governance has had an impact on these agencies. This wide applicability would be expected due to the model's universality.

The dramatic rise of self-governing *iwi* (Maori tribes) has meant greater attention to governance with these groups, including a proposed law for Maori governance, entitled *Waka Umanga*, which refers to Policy Governance principles.

One effective way that Policy Governance has spread to these diverse agencies is through the work of Policy Governance practitioners alongside national associations that have included Policy Governance in guidance documents for their sector. For example, New Zealand's national sporting agency provides advice to sporting entities and clubs across the country. It developed a resource, "Nine Steps to Effective Governance," that is strongly influenced by the Policy Governance model. A similar resource is available for the creative arts sector and school boards of trustees, where governance documentation strongly reflects Policy Governance principles. And a government-run community Internet resource that many small agencies rely on also promotes Policy Governance and provides examples of policies.

Many other entities, such as the newly established primary health organizations, refer to the model and suggest it as a preferred option. Sometimes, however, Policy Governance has been modified, either within the resource or by those implementing it, and these changes have had a negative impact on the model's integrity. Awareness of the model therefore extends beyond those working to

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Linking with Owners

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broad outline of a three-year plan, fleshing out the details of the first year, including specific questions to ask and detailed processes to use. For the second and third years, identify general groups that you plan to approach and the most likely method to reach them. Near the end of the first year, reflect on your experience; then flesh out the details for Year Two, which will now become the new Year One, and add a new third year. This provides a perpetual plan that is always updated.

Step 5: Implement the plan. Having a plan is great. But until the plan has legs, you have no basis for knowing if the decisions you are making about Ends are consistent with your owners' wishes. Simply start.

Step 6: Discuss the owner input at one or more board meetings. Schedule a good chunk of time at board meetings to discuss what you have heard from owners and the implications for your Ends. Use a simple system to keep track of the implications of what you hear as you debrief each portion of ownership linkage. When you have accumulated sufficient information to feel reasonably confident that you have tapped your ownership's diversity, amend the Ends as necessary.

Step 7: Let the owners know what happened to their input. Nothing will turn off the flow of useful information from the owners more quickly than asking for information and then failing to let them know what you did with it. This does not mean that the board has to act on every suggestion from the ownership. It does mean that you provide a timely response to let them know how their information was used in your decision making. Never let the owners feel that their input has gone into a black hole.

Eating the Elephant Is Possible!

These basic elements and steps should help any board tackle the "elephant" of ownership linkage with increased confidence. Remember that this is one of the board's most important jobs—important enough to spend time learning to do well.

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implement it faithfully. A number of agencies we work with already have bits of Policy Governance thinking sprinkled in their existing documentation. This has often been dropped in by someone such as a board member or consultant who found it on the Web and thought it looked like "good stuff," but without reading further.

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Through this work over the past decade, we can report that New Zealand is achieving a critical mass for the Carver model, as well as gaining credibility for Policy Governance practitioners and boards. This leads neatly onto the future challenges for New Zealand. We are at a tipping point of awareness, presenting opportunity to be built on in coming years.

Currently four New Zealanders have attended the Policy Governance Academy taught by John and Miriam Carver. We are informally in contact with each other and more recently have been discussing whether to develop a New Zealand or Australasian linkage to the International Policy Governance Association, thereby developing local networks to ensure support and shared learning.

The Policy Governance model has global relevance, and in New Zealand, we need to work together to capture local language and implementation issues that maintain the model's integrity. This has the potential to fundamentally transform governance across a range of key organizations. □

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