Engaging the Bored Board

A complex responsive process inquiry into the relationship between meaning and structure

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Abstract

Non-profit board functioning is traditionally examined through structures and procedures. While there is a growing interesting in meaningfulness at work, most research focuses on paid employment. This report looks at a non-profit board functioning in relation to meaningfulness. Presented as a case study, this report analyses a consulting project through the combined lenses of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, 2003a) and process consultation (Schein, 1999). The project found that meaningfulness within a non-profit board was inextricably related to its organisational structure, that complex responsive processes of relating uses the reality of our humanity to help make sense of how we organise, and finally, how consultant learning emerges from imperfect experiences. The hope is that further research will be conducted on the impact of meaningfulness on non-profit boards, and that complex responsive processes will become a more widely used lens for consulting practice.

Keywords: non-profits, board governance, meaningfulness, complex responsive processes, process consultation

A high performing governing board is the aspiration of every non-profit organisation. There are library bookshelves, journal archives, websites and even blogs full of information, suggestions and guidelines on how to improve board performance. The vast majority of these focus on the structural dimensions, the "what" and the "how" of governing boards: roles and responsibilities, strategic planning, committee and meeting structure, board composition and recruitment, assessing performance and sometimes group dynamics. These structural dimensions are all essential for viable board functioning. However, this paper suggests there is another essential element that is barely considered in the literature on successful board functioning: the sense of meaning with which board directors engage in this work, the "why".

Viktor Frankl (1959/2004), psychiatrist and concentration camp survivor, is renowned for his assertion that man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life. He goes on to state that increasingly, people are facing an existential vacuum, and that the true meaning of life is out in the world, not within the individual psyche. Considering the hours we spend at work, this becomes a natural place in which to search for meaning. There is increasing research pointing to the significant role work plays in our sense of meaningfulness. Employees experiencing meaningful work demonstrate greater wellbeing (Geldenhuys, Łaba, & Venter, 2014), they experience higher levels of engagement (Fairlie, 2011), they experience better relationships (Tummers & Knies, 2013), and they demonstrate higher satisfaction and empowerment and lower stress levels (Rosso, Dekas & Wrzesniewski, 2010). However, this research all focuses on paid employment. Research on meaningfulness and its impact on voluntary non-profit board work is negligible. What follows is a case study tracking the consultant's process of engagement, discovery, learning, trial and error. Using an approach built of process consultation (Schein, 1999) and complexity, I join a governing board in looking at their processes, exploring their dynamics and helping them to find new ways of working together. This case study can be of interest to several different readers: those interested in thinking about governing boards and their sense of meaning; those interested in working with complex responsive processes of relating; and those interested in witnessing a process consultation project from start to finish.

I will begin by giving the research context, which explains the focus and structure of the project. Following that, I will explain the theoretical lens I use, complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey & Griffin, 2005), and how it impacts my approach. Next comes the actual case study, in which I outline the stages of the project, explaining what I did, what I was thinking, what questions arose, what I discovered through research, how that influenced my engagement, and ultimately how the thoughts and actions which comprised this project impacted the governing board I was working with. I finish by discussing my learnings and making suggestions for further research.

Research Context

This case study is the result of a consulting project in support of a Master's in Human Systems Intervention. The focus of the work is thus on the *human* dimension – the individuals, their dynamics, structures and processes, and how to support change through intervention. The underlying philosophy is process consultation, as conceived by Edgar Schein.

> Process consultation is the creation of a relationship with the client that permits the client to perceive, understand, and act on the process events that occur in the client's internal and external environment in order to improve the situation as defined by the client (1999, p. 20).

As a means of illustrating the process and explicating the findings, I have used Peter Block's (2011) phases of consultation to outline the trajectory of this project. First, I outline Block's *Entry and Contracting* stage, in which the client and consultant first met to explore whether this would be a fitting partnership. Next, I examine his *Discovery and Dialogue* phase, in which we gathered data and together began making sense of the information surfacing. The following section will look at *Feedback and Decision to Act*, in which I themed the emergent data and began working on how to best intervene, then the *Engagement and Implementation* stage will explore in detail the different elements of the intervention. And finally, the *Extension, Recycle or Closure* stage will outline how the project came to an end.

However, this project was also approached through the theoretical lens of complex responsive processes of relating, which is applied as a participative act of engaging, inquiring, experimenting and learning (Critchley & Stuelten, 2008). The case study tracks the process of inquiry as it unfolded. Therefore, pertinent research is explored in response to theoretical questions as they arose, thoughts and concerns are expressed as they surfaced, and assumptions expressed as they became clear. The case study is written for the reader to participate in the experience of discovery. The next section provides an introduction to complex responsive processes of relating.

Theoretical Lens

With a desire to approach this project taking into account both the complexity of human systems and the simplicity of human interaction, I was drawn to a theory developed by Ralph Stacey, Patricia Shaw, Douglas Griffin and their colleagues (Stacey & Griffin, 2005), called complex responsive processes of relating. Unlike other complexity theories which are based in the natural sciences and applied to human interaction metaphorically, this theory is based specifically on human thought and communication (Suchman, 2002). Their perspective on human interaction and organisational change proposes moving away from thinking about organisations as systems (or organisms, or machines), to thinking about them as processes - processes of human relating. An organisation, by this definition, is the ongoing patterns of interactions between people (Stacey, 2003b). It is not a physical thing, but a set of processes constantly being re-created with all types of communication between people about their activities, relationships and symbols and what these mean.

Complex responsive process of relating (CRP) perceives learning not as an individual pursuit, but as an activity of interdependent people in which learning is “the emerging shifts in the patterning of human communicative interaction and power relating” (Stacey, 2003b, p. 8). The theory of CRP is comprised of several core concepts. Firstly, drawn from G. H. Mead (1934, as cited in Stacey, 2003a), is the concept that individual minds and society emerge simultaneously through social interaction. The individual and the group are both impacted by interaction and are continuously making meaning as new information arrives, in whatever form – such as an idea, a perspective or an attitude.

The second concept derives from Elias (1934, as cited in Stacey, 2003a), and speaks to power relations. He points out that power exists in any relationship, and as we enter a relationship, the levels of dependency will both constrain and enable that relationship, creating the power dynamic. This informs how people group together and creates a sense of belonging. This sense of “we” is thus inextricable from a sense of “I”, as they are formed in relation to one another.

The third concept centres around the choices we make. As we engage in communicative interaction and power relating, we are always making choices about how to behave. Sometimes the choices are conscious, sometimes not, but they are always based on a system of evaluation which derives from our norms and values. As the norms and values of those working together regularly interact, patterns are created, and power relations are established.

For example, let's say I was raised to show deference towards age. I thus act with slightly elevated respect towards Joan, my older colleague than Peter, my younger one, despite their equal experience in the job. A new person, Tim, joins the team, and notices that Joan is treated thus and as the new team member, follows my example. Joan begins taking a leadership role and the rest of us accept this. We are enabling this power dynamic, because of norms and values. Perhaps Peter now excels in a project, and Tim feels it's important to make public how well Peter performed. His values bring Peter to the attention of others, but let's say Peter's response is to play down his achievements. He doesn't believe in 'tooting his own horn', and this acts as a constraint in the power dynamic with Tim, but gains the attention of Joan, who shares this value... Thus, an ongoing interplay of communicative action, power relating and choices are the fabric of organisations.

The final core theoretical thread of CRP comes from complexity theory. Here, the salient concept is that patterns will emerge from local interactions without a master plan or blueprint. Groups of people in a system will naturally self-organise in an ongoing and evolving way, as long as there is just enough difference among them.

Process Consultation and Complex Responsive Processes of Relating

An important point to address, considering my process consultation stance, is Shaw's (2002) argument that process consultation approaches human interaction with a fundamental theoretical error. The process consultant is paying attention to the individual parts people are playing in a system, helping make sense of the patterns which are being perpetuated by making them explicit. The process consultant then works together with the group of individuals to help them make healthier choices about how to interact. The basic premise is that awareness will facilitate different behaviour. Shaw argues that this perception creates a problematic differentiation between what is being done and how it's being done (the task and the process) as well as the differentiation between an act and reflection on the act. She points to the theories used in process consultation about learning and change, specifically to Argyris and Schön (1976). They suggest that people have *espoused theories* about themselves – internal models governing their behaviour, which in fact are how they want themselves to be or think they should be – and people also have *theories-in-use*, which are the actual models governing their behaviour. For example, I might say of myself that I am a forgiving person, and after someone has wronged me, I might tell myself and everyone else that I have turned the other cheek. However, deep down I still feel suspicion towards that person and perhaps harbour resentment. This might emerge the next time she is looking for support and I find myself resolutely supporting her opponent, possibly without even being conscious it is my resentment, my very *lack of forgiveness*, which is driving me. Argyris and Schön explain that we all have espoused theories which differ from our theories in use, and bringing these into awareness can help us choose different behaviours. Again, the basic premise is that awareness will facilitate different behaviour.

Shaw (2002) argues against this separation of individual from the group, and action from reflection. She suggests that extracting sense in the form of a map with which to guide us, to stand outside the communal experience, removes the essential nature of what human relating is about - spontaneity, the presence of paradox, enabling existing constraints through direct actions - and thus the opportunity to work directly with it. Christensen (2005) furthers this by explaining how intervening is not about creating objective knowledge to use elsewhere, but about engaging in the present to create the future. Reflection, they explain, is just as much part of physical experience as action is, coming from mind, which is part of the body, and both novel thoughts and reflection are bound to emerge at any point in interaction. They are a natural part of relating. While I place high value on individual understanding through action and reflection, and believe that societally there is a great need for this, I agree with Shaw and challenge the idea that an organisational consultant’s role involves helping a group of people search for their underlying motivations in group dynamics. Considering the range of psychologies, the range of capacity for self-reflection and the intimate nature of why people behave as they do, I believe working from a CRP stance holds far more possibility for effective organisational change.

In terms of creating an external map of action and reflection, I disagree with Shaw that this calcifies, or removes experience from the present tense. I would argue that it slows the present down enough for those unaccustomed to thinking in this way to make sense of it. Having a concrete external map with which to makes sense of past acts can be a stepping stone towards creating present tense understanding. The classic example is learning to drive, and how to begin, we must consciously think about and reflect on where we are looking, which pedals our feet are on and what gear we are in. Yet with practice, these movements become fluid, and we respond and engage spontaneously and naturally in the present.

The stance I adopted in approaching this project through a CRP lens, is framed by Critchley and Stuelten (2008) in terms of the challenging paradoxes the CRP consultant engages with: that of both forming and being informed by interactions; simultaneously maintaining and disturbing relationships; knowing and not-knowing – no matter how well people know something, how others engage with it and then what sense is made of it, we can never know.

Which leads to the final paradox, being in control and not in control – there might be a plan and specific intentions, but we can never fully predict the outcome of engagement. “If we see organisations as social processes, then it is obvious that we are not dealing with predictable mechanical, linear dynamic causal chains, but with unpredictable, non-linear dynamic processes of emergence and self-organisation” (Critchley & Stuelten, 2008, p. 12).

In summary, my theoretical stance engaging with this project is something of a hybrid. It is built on a foundation of process consultation, using Edgar Schein’s (1999) ten guiding principles while at the same time understanding organisations as processes. Schein’s (1999) principles shape the attitude I approach with – to always be helpful and stay in touch with the current reality; to access my own ignorance and keep in mind that interventions are not just formal processes, but all interaction with the client will impact in some way and is thus an intervention; that responsibility for both the problem and the solution ultimately lies with the client, my position is to help clarify and facilitate change, and I can best do this by going with the flow, joining the organisation’s current and finding the right time to act differently, rather than trying to create a whole new flow; that confronting must be constructive and timely; that mistakes are where learning comes from, so use them wisely; and finally, to share problems, not try and manage everything on my own.

With an attitude informed by Schein, my lens was also informed by CRP. Christensen (2005) outlines research from this perspective as “emerging participative exploration,” which does not involve diagnosing, creating objective knowledge or creating interventions to correct something, but “ordinary daily conversations in the living present in which the future is perpetually constructed” (p.100). He outlines how this engagement reports from within, noticing the power relations, dynamics of inclusion and exclusion and resulting anxiety, how patterns from earlier relating are being repeated, and helping to articulate a sense of what is going on and themes which are emerging. Engaging thus, we must also keep in mind the inability to predict outcomes, the reality of knowing and not knowing at the same time and the need to hold paradox. The improvement offered to clients is recognising that novelty is happening in the moment, with all the possibility that carries.

Case Study

The client in this case study was a small, grassroots organisation, formed several decades earlier as a self-help group supporting adults impacted by hearing impairment. Over the years they developed into a formal organisation offering information, promoting awareness and providing social services. At the point I contracted to work with the organisation, they had shifted from a loose structure in which decisions and operations were all made and carried out by their large voluntary board, to a more formal structure, with 4 staff members, an 11-person governing board, outsourced skills training, and a regular team of volunteers, serving a membership community of about 250 people.

Entry and Contracting

Our first meeting was in the Executive Director's office, where she and the Board Chair met me in person. We had connected the week before through a contact who believed my MA project interests and their organisational needs might be a match, and both were interested to find out whether this was to be the case. That first meeting lasted two and a half hours, indicating that at the very least we had a great deal to talk about.

The conversation continued in various forms and with various different organisation members over the following months. The match between them as the organisational client and myself as the student consultant was quickly evident in terms of enthusiasm and interest. It took time and a number of iterations, however, to clarify where the project might focus and what each side could expect of the other.

In the initial conversations to explore working together, I spoke to many different stakeholders, including staff, board directors, external skill trainers, service users, new members, and founding members. I observed how things were functioning and asked what people were struggling with. The board emerged as the area with the greatest need for organisational intervention, considering the remit of a board of directors. In terms of definition, "The board of directors is the governing body of a nonprofit. Individuals who sit on the board are responsible for overseeing the organization's activities. Board members meet periodically to discuss and vote on the affairs of the organization. […] The board of directors, as a governing body, should focus on the organization's mission, strategy, and goals" (McRay, 2014). While they were officially a board tasked with governing the organisation, they had little experience or expertise on board functioning or implementing changes, they had yet to create a strategic vision, and there was confusion about where power lay. This was creating tension between the Executive Director (ED) and other board members about role ownership and responsibility, and they demonstrated an overall lack of collective focus and identity.

I then contracted to work with the board towards gaining clarity around their transition from an operational to a governing structure. The project was loosely planned in three stages, with intentional space left for emergence. The first stage, paralleling Block's discovery and dialogue phase (2011), would entail individual interviews and a collective exploration as a whole board of the issues they were facing. The second stage would involve committee members exploring the issues in relation to the work they were doing on their respective committees, and the final stage would be a full board session bringing together the learning from previous stages of inquiry toward gaining clarity around their overall governing functioning.

Background research on the questions I was beginning to ask was already pointing to a good deal of information available about board structures and functioning (www.BoardSource.org; Brown, 2006; Browning & Sparks, 2015; Mina, 2009), as well as a cross-section of information about meaningfulness at work (Fairlie, 2011; Geldenhuys et al., 2014; Rosso et al., 2010). My existing interest in complex processes of relating had me exploring more about how these theories might apply to this organisation and their situation.

The contracting phase eventually came to an end with an agreement that the project purpose was for the board of directors to gain greater clarity, both conceptually and practically, on how to successfully serve as a governing board.

Discovery and Dialogue

At this point, I entered Block's (2011) discovery and dialogue phase of systematically gaining information and making sense of it together through dialogue. The discovery stage of the project lasted about 6 weeks. In that time, the complexity of organisational work already began to set in, as two directors left the board for reasons related to their lives outside of the organisation, and one director was out of the country on extended leave and would only return mid-way through the project. We were down to eight participants. I was facing the CRP paradox of being in control and not in control: the board was only partially available, their membership was in flux, this was clearly a dynamic situation in which I was entering mid-flow. I conducted interviews with six of directors and facilitated the exploratory session for all those present and participating on the project.

Interviews. Half the interviews were with directors in leadership positions and half with directors not holding titled positions, aiming for a cross-section of perspectives. The interview focus was on each person's history with the organisation, what sense of meaning they drew from their participation, how they viewed that participation and their impressions of what was and was not functioning well on the board as a whole. The session then deepened these individual inquiries by opening these topics for discussion and turning the question towards where to focus this project.

An important feature here is that the gathering of information and making sense of it were not two distinct stages. The interviews were semi-structured – which means they became conversations guided by several central questions. Each interview was a mutual unfolding of understanding between myself and the participant. Keeping CRP in mind, we were making sense of their stories together, which we both took forward in our subsequent interactions. Thus, the interviews were both a flow of information and a means to create new meaning as we both explored and communicated within this conversation. Creating new meaning was not a separate reflective act, but part of the conversational act, demonstrating no separation of reflection and action. Christensen (2005) explains how conversation can facilitate the free-flow of exploration to hold ambiguity for long enough for something novel to emerge, for a fresh understanding of one's own part in the creation of organisational patterns. Shaw (2002) gives an example of how sense-making in an organisation evolved as people continued talking together. "It was as though an unspoken potential in their contributions had been amplified in subsequent contributions. But this potential was not 'there' waiting, it was only created in further speaking" (p. 103). In a similar way, the conversations I was having with different board members was building on conversations, ideas, thoughts and feelings which were being articulated by the different members, and giving space for new perceptions.

I should add here that the definition of conversation from which I am working is not simply the verbal back and forth of information between people. Building on Mead's explanation of communication as what is constructed between a gesture- the sending, and a response- the receiving (1934, as cited in Stacey, 2003a), I am defining conversation as all communication as it occurs in the processes of interaction. In terms of complex responsive processes, this would include words and sentences people utter, as well as their tone of voice, their body posture, and what that means to the sender and the receiver and what it evokes in the receiver in terms of response. For example, in one interview when I asked the interviewee what she meant by "She behaves like a Chair," in reference to the current Board Chair, she took a deep breath, her shoulders softened and the tone of her voice changed as she said, "She brought back a sense of civility, of decency. Things were no longer ugly." I gained from this an emotional context of relief, and that the shift in leadership style had a significant impact. I attributed to the word "ugly" my own experience of human interaction demonstrating selfish intentions and base articulation. My nodding and facial expression encouraged further commentary, which came in the form of the interviewee's confidence in and doubts about the current leadership. I created meaning from the totality of what I received from her, and in my expression and follow up questions expressed this meaning, which created further meaning from her. Thus, the conversation was built on multiple levels or our communicative interaction.

Discovery session. The session too, was an experience of exploring the patterns of interaction. The directors shared with one another their thoughts and feelings about the organisation and their involvement with the board. This sharing created conversations, which built upon one another. For example, after looking at a model of governance, the members discussed in small groups where they thought they were excelling and where they thought they needed more work. The groups reported back very different perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses and demonstrated surprise at this difference. Following this, they each chose images which represented the kind of board members they wanted to be, and discussed their aims and/or current strengths in pairs. The qualities they sought were clearly influenced by the earlier discussions and the differences which had emerged. Pairs questioned with one another what the board needed and how they felt they could be involved in that. Although not quantifiable, the shift in energy from cautious turn taking in pairs to a full room of participating voices, indicated a shift in interaction, communication and sense-making. Again, no separation can be made in the reflection of themselves and their conversational acting. In Critchely and Stuelten's (2008) language, they were engaging in a participative process of exploration through this collective inquiry. They were questioning their part in the existing organisational pattern of relating, and contemplating how they might create change. During the session I introduced Jim Brown's Governance Excellence Model (2006), in which he outlines the seven disciplines he sees as necessary for boards to govern with excellence:

(1.) ***Directing*** *and (2.)* ***Protecting*** *organisational performance*: This involves defining the mission, vision and values of the organisation, determining the key result areas and creating and using a monitoring system.

(3.) ***Respecting*** *member expectations*: This encompasses listening to organisation members, inviting input from them and explaining board actions.

(4.) ***Connecting*** *with one another*: This includes how the board interact with one another, agreeing, understanding and complying with expectations of one another, creating and following their own communication processes and contributing to effective team dynamics.

(5.) ***Expecting*** *board-management relations*: This takes into account the relationship between the board and management. Expectations of both the organisation as a whole and the Executive Director is expected to be articulated, communication and good relations are to be expected.

(6.) ***Selecting*** *and redirecting the ED*: This entails the authority the board holds in choosing people to fulfil key roles and removing them if necessary, particularly the Executive Director or CEO.

(7.) ***Reflecting*** *on organisational results*: This involves thinking about, and being sure to understand, the results of the organisation's operations and when deviations have been made, understanding why they have been made.

The focus of his model is essentially the board's relational dynamics and service attitude. The implication is that without these basic attitudes and approaches, a board's oversight, strategy and overall performance will struggle to remain highly effective over time. These are basic building blocks, and were particularly important for a board such as this in the nascent stages of understanding their role and purpose.

In our session, this served as a point from which to begin individual self-reflection and collective assessment. Discussion surfaced significantly different perceptions as the directors placed themselves within the model, and this variance served to catalyse further reflection and challenge beliefs and assumptions. For example one director explained how he felt confident the board connected with one another very well, to which another responded with surprise and said she felt there was a lack of communication. A discussion then ensued, with other directors joining in, about where they did and did not communicate effectively. This was not about making agreements or reaching conclusions. The discussion achieved a collectively raised awareness around both these seven relational and attitudinal concepts and themselves as a group. Through Critchley and Stuelten's (2008) perspective, we were forming interaction while also being formed by it.

The final element in the session involved agreeing where to focus this project. The decision had been made to change their name at the last Annual General Meeting, but the organisation had been unable to complete the task and agree on a name. The board members decided they wanted to focus the project on selecting a name. As a process consultant I felt I was walking a fine line, so as not to let myself become a "pair of hands," in which I was simply completing a task within the organisation (Block, 2011). I wanted to use this process of deciding and agreeing on the new name as a means of examining and clarifying their governing board functioning. In other words, we would use this process as a learning ground to examine how they were functioning, making strengths and areas for development explicit, thereby bringing awareness to the processes they were using as well as experimenting with new ones. Using the name change would certainly keep their interest and energy levels high, as there were many strong views.

As the topic was explored, it led to increasing frustration around the names being considered. Voices increasingly piled on top of one another until time began to run out. The discussion was going to have to stop as directors prepared to leave, and an angry outburst reflected the frustration felt by some at once again circling this topic without any apparent movement. This outburst highlighted a pattern they had exhibited at previous board meetings and clearly was at risk of taking place again here: heated topics were not resolved in time, and meetings disbanded without resolution. From a CRP perspective, this was the present patterning of interaction creating a familiar future outcome. These heated topics were then taken up by the operational staff, and a solution offered to the board, which they accepted, apparently with the relief of not having to enter into conflict again. Their official structure dictated that such topics were the responsibility of the board, but their self-organisation had led to this pattern, in which operations came up with solutions and the board mostly accepted. My role in the system could bring to the fore the possibility of shifting this pattern. In the present moment, a different choice, a different path, could be taken. With this in mind, I halted the discourse and invited the directors to commit to an ongoing collective process to reach completion together. We would dedicate a period of time in our final session to completing the decision-making process, and in the meantime would open an online conversation so that the current discussion could continue. Tempers were frayed and tensions elevated; one member left without saying goodbye to me, but the existing dynamic had been altered. As the familiar pattern was shifted, so new possibilities emerged. Power in one place was constrained and in other was enabled. Board members were accustomed to letting difficult topics go, safe in the knowledge that operations would return with a proposed solution. This gave operations a certain power over the board, while at the same time helping the board with their inability to make decisions. Now the board accepted the responsibility of following through with the decision, at the same time gaining a power they had previously forfeited through the pattern of relating they had previously established. There was no need for operational staff to take over the issue, or, perceived differently, pick up the slack. This was a moment in which the paradox of both disturbing and maintaining relationships became apparent. My role was to disturb both the client’s relationship with me and to disturb the existing group relationship, causing just enough rupture to create a new outcome, but at the same time keeping the rupture small enough that the relationships were all maintained.

This initial discovery stage of the project, involving gathering information on how the board was currently functioning, led to three central lines of inquiry – questions about structure, defined by a significant lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities; evidence of a disparate sense of meaning regarding this board work; and finally a "stuckness" in that after three years, their transition to a governing structure was barely progressing.

The first line of inquiry, regarding structure, roles and responsibilities led me towards the rich body of practical information on how boards can develop and improve their functioning. The second line of inquiry led me to the more academic field of research around meaningfulness at work. Here too, there exists a large amount of information, although stemming from different disciplines and therefore approaching the concept with differing intentions. Finally, to address the lack of change the board had thus far experienced, I turned to complex responsive processes of relating.

Feedback and Decision to Act

As with the previous phase, feedback and decisions were not discrete events, but part of the ongoing conversation between client and consultant. I had collated themes from the initial interview data to use in the discovery board session, and I continued collating themes that emerged from later interviews and the session – including taking note of my thoughts and emotional responses. My intention was to create iterative cycles examining the issues which were being surfaced by the board, such as: What are legitimate expectations of the work we should be doing? Is there enough motivation? What skills do we need as a board? These questions could now be tagged with "… and how do we respond to this regarding the name change?” One of my roles as a consultant was to reflect back to the board what I saw them asking and doing, another was to reflect on my own experience of these things in a way that could bring value to them (Christensen, 2005).

I had a few weeks until my next session with the board, and I intended to use this time for both research and reflection. For several months I had been in contact with the organisation, observing their interaction, joining in conversations, listening, asking questions, interviewing, and now also facilitating a collective exploration on some subjects pertinent to them. I could reflect on my involvement and my response to the dynamics as I undertook research.

At board meetings, I had witnessed questions about roles and responsibilities and lack of clarity regarding accountability. There was uncertainty and confusion around who was and who should be making various decisions, messages became complicated and often were not heard as they were intended, and the same issues seemed to surface and circulate in repetitive patterns. My attention at this point turned towards researching how successful boards are structured. BoardSource (2016) offered the foundational essentials on board governance with information on topics such as ethics, roles, committees, documentation, reports and responsibilities. While these basic structures are generally agreed upon within the literature, how they are translated within each organisation will differ. *The Director’s Manual*, by Browning and Sparks (2015), looks at board governance with an added layer of culture and group dynamics. They suggest, that by understanding the leadership style of the organisation’s leader, usually a Chief Commanding Officer or as in the case of my organisation, an Executive Director, one can make sense of the decision-making processes of the board. So if our ED is an “asserter,” i.e. results oriented, good in a crisis, but with a leaning towards autocracy and low tolerance for dissention under stress, this will engender fear and thus create a culture of “dependence” on the board. Such a board can become ineffective in their communication due either to actual pressure or a belief in the pressure to conform (p. 74). This made sense regarding the general acquiescence I had observed at board meetings, how they were dominated by the reporting of organisational operations, as well as the general lack of clarity around what governing work the board should be doing. Turning in more detail toward the confusion of roles and responsibility, I focused my research on the theme of role ambiguity.

Role ambiguity. "The single most important decision your board makes… is where to draw the line between governance and management work" (Pointer & Orlikoff, 2002, p. 26). While this sounds like a simple and concise starting point, the reality of trying to make this decision surfaces a somewhat murky reality. Zimmermann and Stevens' (2008) research indicates that non-profit boards which struggle the most with achieving this are those which are small in size, operate with a small budget, are younger (at least developmentally), and don't offer training to board members. This board unquestionably met three of these criteria, and if we look at age developmentally, possibly all four - leading to tougher clarity between governing and management work.

Struggling with clarity on roles and responsibilities is one of the most commonly cited board issues. Marx and Davis published research findings in which they assess the experience of board roles and responsibilities from the perspectives of current Executive Directors (2012). Their purpose was to augment the scant empirical research on roles and responsibilities as they are experienced in practice, rather than as they are written about in theory. And indeed, their findings reflect the board with which I was working. Looking at board development, structures and performance, they measured the involvement of both the ED and the board in a range of tasks which are commonly expected to be under the remit of a governing board. The results indicated that EDs reported being as or more involved than their boards in many of the tasks.

A question of reality versus theory comes to the fore. While there is ample research indicating that increased role ambiguity lowers job satisfaction, effort and organisational commitment (Sakires, Doherty & Misener, 2009), in organisations small or sufficiently underfunded, people are going to be taking on multiple roles. This can often lead to confusion and ambiguity. Brown (2006) states, “The secret to effectiveness is understanding the different roles within an organization and how those roles relate” (p. 32). He then continues with, “When the single straight lines of communication, authority, and accountability get broken, confusion and chaos result” (p. 37). This is undoubtedly true, but arguably near impossible to achieve in certain realities. Many organisations, as in the one with which I was working, have board members who are also service users or volunteer workers or both. Those are three very different hats to wear, each with different responsibilities and lines of accountability. Without an explicit understanding of how they are operating as a team, navigating this becomes very difficult.

A final point to consider regarding role ambiguity is the innate paradox that working as a volunteer always carries with it. As Merrell (2000) points out, volunteer work, which is optional, voluntary, usually within a domain of interest to the worker, commonly involves both a “work” aspect and a “leisure” aspect, each carrying very different assumptions of behaviour and boundaries. Learning to navigate this paradox can be difficult for the volunteers as well as the paid employees working with them. Keeping in mind that “Expectations of Work” as well as “Board Motivation,” emerged as themes from the discovery phase of this project, these questions of leisure over work behaviour seemed exactly the paradox this board was struggling to navigate.

Considering whether board members felt motived more through work or leisure serves as an apt segue into my following area of research: meaningfulness. My experience with this board so far indicated that directors could speak about an individual sense of meaningfulness, what was meaningful for them personally, but not about a collective sense of meaningfulness, a shared narrative about what was meaningful about this board. In interviews and in the discovery session, directors articulated clearly what drew them to this work and why they continued to serve. They were also comfortable sharing this with one another. However, the conversations about meaning ended once directors had shared with one another. Unlike other areas of conversation, there was no building, no finding of parallels or discussion of differences. This collective sense of *our meaning* was absent from the room. My sense was that this was impacting their performance, however I turned to existing research to ascertain whether this was a valid idea to pursue.

Meaningfulness. I realised clarifying the definition of meaningfulness was an essential first step - depending on discipline or inclination, there are a number of different definitions. According to Wrzesniewski (2003), *meaning* is a tool we use to impose stability on our lives as we strive to fulfil and ultimately interpret our purpose, values, efficacy and self-worth. Rosso et al. (2010), suggest that while *meaning* denotes making sense of things, it is uniformly written about in a positive light in the literature, suggesting that it is being mistaken for *meaningfulness*, which "refers to the amount of significance something holds for an individual" (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003 as cited in Rosso et al., 2010). I suggest that Wrzesniewski's definition of meaning and Pratt and Ashford's definition of meaningfulness create a suitably textured understanding of the concept this case study explores.

Navigating existing research on meaningfulness at work was a tricky endeavour in reference to a voluntary non-profit board. The primary body of research on meaningfulness at work centres on corporate for-profit employment. Some of the research focuses on non-profit employment, while other on paid board work, with some on voluntary work. However, very little exists on voluntary non-profit board work. However, there are elements in these different research areas which hold relevance for this case.

I began by looking at meaningfulness as it is approached from disciples with origins in organisational psychology, touching on research looking at work motivation, commitment and engagement. Until fairly recently, meaningfulness did not have much prominence in this literature, however, there is a growing trend towards seeing its relevance.

Meaningfulness was found to be a significant factor in corporate board motivation. In a study by Walther, Möltner, and Morner (2017), motivation was found to span a spectrum from material factors (finances, reputation) to factors of volition (meaningfulness, congruence & enjoyment), thereby confirming that meaningfulness was a motivating factor, even in this sector offering financial motivation. Turning to voluntary board commitment, Stephens, Dawley, and Stephens (2004) assessed that the absence of financial motivation increased the impact of commitment on performance. In this case, greater emotional attachment to and identification with the organisation increased commitment; and increased commitment led to higher organisational performance.

Employee engagement has also gained growing attention of late, as this “has emerged as a critical driver of business success in today’s competitive marketplace” (Lockwood, 2007, p. 2). Engagement studies have commonly focused on vigour, dedication and absorption (encompassing physical, emotional and cognitive dimensions) using Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, and Bakker’s (2002) instrument; however attention is more recently being placed on the need to include meaningfulness in these studies. Fairlie (2011) identifies meaningfulness as the strongest predictor of work engagement, over all three of the other accepted dimensions. In a study linking work engagement and organisational commitment, Geldenhuys et al. (2014) demonstrate that meaningfulness is the dimension that links work engagement with organisational commitment.

This shift in emphasis towards meaningfulness indicates that there is a growing awareness of its impact when looking at how people are engaging with their work and workplace, and thus indeed, it is an important thread to follow in this case study.

Turning my attention from theory back to the project, I was armed with a number of new points to consider. Together with my assertion to consider meaningfulness, I had new learning about structure. There were concrete structures which might be of value, specifically one Brown (2006) points out of generating *options*, which creates discussion and involvement, over *recommendations*, which generate a simple yes/no vote and keeps collective, creative thinking out of the boardroom. In addition, using recommendations could serve the purpose of giving the directors as a whole more agency, which over time could also alter the nature of their "dependence." And as a side note on regarding role ambiguity, I kept in mind the need for clarity where it was possible, and the awareness that it would probably never be fully possible.

At this point I was ready to move into the next of Block's phases, engagement and implementation. I had practical and personal experience working with the board members, I had learnings from research in the areas I wanted to help them explore. Keeping in mind that I would be looking for places in which dynamics of power and relating could be made explicit, leaned into and possibly shifted, I prepared for our next session together for committee members.

Engagement and Implementation

Roughly half the board worked on committees, and the second session was designed to work at the committee level. In this smaller group, not only was there greater scope for intimate discussion, but this group comprised of both formal and informal leaders – when they spoke, others tended to listen. This session seemed like an excellent opportunity to start a collective inquiry into some of their existing patterns, in the hope that changes conceived within this group could have greater impact for the board as a whole. From my CRP stance, I would be acting with intention, in the knowledge that I could not predict an outcome.

Committee session. The session began as the perfect example of being in control and simultaneously not in control. I knew who was to participate, I had all the logistics and materials organised, and yet factors outside of my control heavily impacted the start. One participant was not able to attend, one was half an hour late stuck in traffic, another was joining virtually due to medical reasons. I hadn't seen one participant since her acrimonious departure from the discovery session, and another had been away and this was her first engagement with the project. I was aware that as a consultant and facilitator, there were a multitude of ways this could unfold which I was unable to control, and my intention was to remain flexible, keeping in mind what I want to achieve and how I wanted to achieve it, while remaining open and responsive to the dynamics, ready to shift direction and accommodate what the moment required.

The start was dishevelled, but energetic and positive, and we soon began discussing the themes which had emerged during the discovery phase. I presented the themes in statements from interviews, giving a solid picture of where the board felt it was struggling in its governing role. Each statement was on a piece of paper which the participants worked together to arrange. This created physical engagement with the words as well as discussion with one another over content, eventually leading to a conversation about the experience of meaningful work. Although the arranging activity was imperfect in terms of task goal, a collective sense of awareness around board struggles was developing.

We subsequently explored how Brown's (2006) idea of options and recommendations might be playing out in their board meetings and what role they individually played in this. We used role play – myself as the board director bringing in recommendations, the participants either as themselves or caricatures of themselves. This allowed for improvisational responses to the situation, thereby encouraging changes in the patterning of the existing conversation. In explaining improvisation through jazz music, Friis and Larsen point out that novelty appears by combining existing elements in a new way, and the condition that provides novelty is performance (2006, p. 35). Larsen (2006) discusses how spontaneity, allowing oneself to take the attitude of another, is risky in organisational settings. It requires a certain level of vulnerability, as it is in part oneself but in part a relational response to the situation. If power is understood as an ongoing expression of dependency, then spontaneous gestures, speech, interaction can alter the current pattern of dependency, thus power. For example, in one of our role plays, a participant responded quickly, passionately and confidently to a situation. She soon realised her expression was an exaggerated form of her true opinion, and the position of power she had entered with turned into self-reflection.

We spent the remainder of the session in discussion stemming from the role plays, abandoning the original plan of turning to the practical tasks the committees were working on. The emergent conversation was rich and impactful. One participant recognised her own pattern of giving recommendations, albeit with the best of intentions, and now had a chance to reflect with others on the effect it had on group dynamics. Another participant found space to voice a long held fundamental disagreement about committee authority. Yet another was confronted with the degree of discontent within the board. These discussions made a sold impact on their understanding of their organisational structure, while also opening a window to what they held meaningful.

It felt like the ripples of change were beginning to form. At the end of the session, the ED expressed interest in having a one-to-one session with me to talk through some of the issues in greater detail. Once again, this felt like an opportunity to both maintain and disturb an important relationship, inviting a shift in patterning.

In the following board meeting there were visible changes in behaviour. More space was given for questions and to check understanding. The ED no longer read through her report, taking up the bulk of the meeting, but pointed out important highlights. More questions were asked and more discussion ensued. And for the first time since I had been observing, the meeting finished on time - to a round of applause and cheers around the room!

Until this point, I had been considering structure and meaningfulness as two discrete foci. However, after the experience and outcomes of both the discovery and committee sessions, I started wondering about the relationship between structure and meaningfulness. The image which formed in my mind was that of a DNA helix with one strand representing the organisational structure and the other representing their sense of meaning. I wasn't seeing a causal relationship, but rather an inextricably connected, mutually influencing one. Adding to this, I visualised their learning as patterns of interaction as an inverse fractal – thus a double helix creating slightly altered fractal patterns of itself. If *structure* and *meaningfulness* are mutually influencing elements which form the basic code that defines the organisation, and their learning was a natural evolution of their interaction, created through self-organisation in response to slight changes and differences, then this could be seen as a fractal. Oxford Living

Dictionaries defines a fractal as “A curve or geometrical figure, each part of which has the same statistical character as the whole. They are useful in modelling structures (such as snowflakes) in which similar patterns recur at progressively smaller scales…”. Instead of stepping into a shape and seeing the ever-smaller repetitions, I step in and look the other way, to the ever growing, self-perpetuating but altered versions of itself. As Brown states in her discussion on organisations as fractals, “what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system” (2017, p. 53).

Such flights of visual fancy were interesting and illuminating, but needed to be grounded in the concrete if they were going to be useful to the client. This took me back into research as I wondered what literature was available about the connection between meaningfulness and structure of non-profit boards. It turned out, there was very little.

Grounding the “fractal helix” in research. In 1976, Peter Drucker, called the father of modern management (Cohen, 2008), published an essay called “The Bored Board.” Drucker’s (1976/2010a) main argument was that having been conceived several hundred years prior, boards were not structured to support governance of the modern business. Instead, being a board director had become largely symbolic, and even if a board was interested and experienced, they found themselves bogged down in trivia due to their legal requirements.

Focus on board directorship gained increasing attention in the following decades. As Hall describes in his history of non-profit boards, “The real tidal wave of interest emerged in the early 1980s, when the number of publications about governance surged from two or three a year to dozens” (2003, p. 22). The role of governance was steadily reformulated into what we see boards striving for today – executing their duties of care, loyalty and obedience through establishing organisational identity, ensuring resources and providing oversight (BoardSource, 2016).

Despite changes in many of the dynamics in the “bored boards” of which Drucker (1976/2010a) spoke, I would argue that there remains, perhaps for different reasons, some truths in the underlying problems he identified.

In *Governance as Leadership* (2005), Chait, Ryan and Taylor addressed what they identify as the main problems with boards – disengagement, dysfunctional dynamics and role confusion. They suggest that non-profit managers have become more like leaders, which is what is expected of those who head non-profit organisations; and board directors have become more like managers, after being recruited to govern or even cultivate a particular part of the organisation. This, they posit, has caused not only confusion in roles but discontent from boards in how they spend their time. While problems in boards are generally framed in terms of performance, Chait et al. suggest that the problems are actually about purpose. Boards aren’t just confused, frustrated and disengaged, they say, but their current structures strip them of a sense of purpose. Their book goes on to explain how boards can overcome these issues by engaging in what they identify as fiduciary, strategic and generative governing.

Ryan, Chait and Taylor (2018) outline the three causes in this loss of purpose. They suggest boards end up playing a role which might be necessary, but is far from compelling, and thus results in disengaged and ineffective boards. The first one they call the “Substitute Teacher”, in which boards are simply expected to keep order, keep the ED accountable, and prevent any trouble. The second they call the “Modern Monarch”, in which their role is primarily representative, whether through their personal reputation or societal assumptions of boards keeping organisations accountable. The final is the “Firefighter”, whose only real purpose is to jump into action during a crisis.

Chait et al. (2005) appear to focus on many of the same issues Drucker identified, albeit in far greater detail, despite all the changes in board governance in the decades between them. This suggests to me that despite all the development which went into board governance in those decades, one profound element remained unattended to- their sense of purpose. A further contribution to this inquiry comes from a comprehensive article by Denny (2015), in which she considers non-profit board engagement and role ambiguity. Considering Chait et al.'s perspectives, among others, she concludes by suggesting the first step, "In order to become more effective and engage, boards need to consider who they are responsible to and define their purpose and role" (p. 42).

Although the previous authors do not speak directly to the question of *meaningfulness*, they talk about *purpose*. I will differentiate purpose as being more action oriented, the pursuit of a goal, while meaning as being more personal, the individual significance attached to something (Stevenson, 2014). The authors above addressed boards' general lack of a significant focus to pursue, while I was questioning this board's individual and collective sense of values-efficacy-self-worth leading to significant focus. Close, but not quite the same. Without entering into a philosophical debate, I will suggest that in this context, meaning is the precursor to purpose.

Drucker (1976/2010a) said (among other things) that there was a problem. Chait et al. (2005) defined a possible cause of the problem (among other things). Denny (2015) suggested a self-reflective stance and agency (among other things). Drawing from these three points I returned to my project and considered my question about the mutually impacting pattern of structure and meaningfulness, within the pattern of board interactions.

Executive Director session. My next contact was the one-to-one session with the Executive Director, who had expressed a desire to spend some time talking in more depth about the issues which had been emerging through the project. Her request of me created a subtle shift in the power dynamics. Keeping in mind that power reflects a degree of dependency, she had placed herself in a more vulnerable position, taken the risk of changing the dynamic between us, and thereby created the conditions for change.

My posture in entering this session was one of intention and curiosity. There were topics I was keen to talk about, believing they would serve both the ED and board well to be explored in this context, and topics I was keen to avoid, believing they might keep us turning in unproductive circles. However, I held these preferences in the background, and entered open to the EDs lead. Critchley and Stuelten's (2008) paradox of knowing and not knowing was at the forefront of my experience. They describe this as the difference between a Shakespeare play and a piece of improvisation theatre. Even in the Shakespeare play, unexpected things may happen, despite knowing the plot and stage directions, the unexpected can occur. However, in a piece of improvisation theatre, there is neither plot nor stage directions, merely the stage, the actors, and perhaps a number of props. This is how I entered the session – I knew the stage, I knew the actors, I had a number of props at my disposal, but how it would unfold was left to the moment.

In fact, we spoke both about topics I had hoped to, and topics I had thought it best not to. And *all* topics we discussed felt very useful. Misconceptions – mine and hers – were clarified: she shared important sense-making narratives; I shared knowledge on practical issues such as monthly board report; we talked through different leadership styles and their impacts; and the reality of navigating expectations and her own feelings around those expectations. We unpacked some of the intricacies of the board-management power dynamics, and how her perceptions of where power lay impacted her choices.

The conversation felt like the building of personal meaning upon structural dynamics, adding to collective meaning and inter-personal dynamics, creating in us both, a new sense and understanding. The "fractal helix" was visible, creating an altered and expanding pattern.

Broader social questions. This experience of mutual sense-making led me to question how the literature on non-profits seemed to presume meaningfulness in the sector. There is evidence that satisfaction and motivation linked to meaningfulness within the non-profit sector is higher than in for-profit sectors (Borzaga & Tortia, 2006), however the non-profit sector as a whole does often come with an assumption of innate meaningfulness. Despite challenges to this assumption dating almost 40 years (Mirvis & Hackett, 1983), such ideals remain pervasive. As Dempsey and Sanders (2010) articulate, "Both popular and scholarly accounts identify non-profits as key sources of meaningful work and associate them with the pursuit of a higher calling" (p. 440). They immediately move on to challenge these "[r]omantic visions of non-profit work as inherently meaningful," (p. 440) pointing to both the trade-offs of working in the sector and that it remains entwined in capitalist influences.

Further considering these "capitalist influences," I looked to a challenge Aktouf (1992) made almost thirty years ago, to what he was seeing as the direction management literature was taking in an attempt to create a more human centred workplace. His key thesis, taking a strong Marxist perspective, was that the whole movement was impossible because workers were still lacking authority over their means of production. Employees still didn't have the power and still couldn't make the decisions. The result, he claimed, was the continued alienation of man through his work.

This argument has remained current, without the political ideology, through McGuire, Cross and O'Donnell (2005), in their assessment of humanistic approaches to human resource development. They point out that the desire to build organisational culture around the ideals of self-development, personal goals and participation are doomed to fail because organisations exist within the capitalist structure in which shareholder (or stakeholder, I would argue) returns are expected through maximizing employee (or volunteer) productivity. “In reality, humanistic approaches are indicative of a modern, sophisticated, latently strategic approach to people management, designed to elicit proactive, self-motivated employee behaviour” (p. 5). There are small, albeit increasing, examples where power, both financial and personal, are indeed in the hands of those doing the work. However, the vast majority of our professional institutions remain structured in a way which separate power and labour, despite recognition within the field of human resources (psychology, sociology, management) as to the significance of autonomy and self-actualisation. Irrespective of possible good intention, the bottom line is that an organisational purpose cannot be the same as an individual purpose, leaving many human resource approaches sounding like rhetoric.

For decades there has been a growing acceptance of this value of empowering individuals and fostering personal meaning for work performance. There are but few voices which challenge the efficacy of this movement within prevailing institutional structures. Assumptions remain about non-profit work being inherently meaningful, assumptions remain about the value of humanistic approaches to increase motivation. This presents a paradox which needs to be navigated, between a societal-structural reality, and the growing value placed on meaningfulness at work.

Offering a different perspective of meaningfulness at work that originates in discursive resources, Kuhn et al. (2008) look to linguistic devices that guide our interpretations and construct the perceptions within any group. They suggest that organisational members, especially of non-profits where monetary compensation is low or non-existent, “use the set of available discursive resources to constitute personal identities by both making sense of their work and infusing it with value” (p. 164). There is a significant body of research on the question of whether meaning is intrinsically or extrinsically motivated and whether it is socially or individually constructed; however, without delving into questions of origin, I return to the impact of meaningfulness in the non-profit sector.

My experience in this organisation has been that a sense of meaning remains latent within individuals unless it is explicitly drawn out and engaged with collectively. We had taken steps in that direction, but not yet achieved the collective meaningfulness I had sensed lacking when I had begun this project.

Taking a pause to revisit my contracted purpose, I considered whether there were any changes occurring in the board’s clarity on their governing role. Although I couldn’t give a definitive answer, there were indications I could look to. At the last board meeting I had observed, there was more space left for questions. The Board Chair had made a greater effort than I’d witnessed before to check for comprehension and clarity. The ED had announced there would be a new format for her monthly reports. Several directors had demonstrated new self-awareness of the impact of some of their behaviours. And the email thread which emerged from the discovery session had continued as an ongoing background conversation. There were undoubtedly some changes, whether these contributed towards overall clarity or not remained to be seen.

Final session. We had agreed during the discovery session to dedicate time to the name change decision-making process. In the meantime, the ongoing email conversation between all board members had generated several new name possibilities, two public consultations for their membership had given a sense of the more popular options among their membership, as well as generating further feasible options, and all board directors were aware we would be going through a selection process. The intention was set around what we were looking to achieve, but CRP reminded me that outcomes could not be predicted. In addition to the name change, we were planning to look in more depth at the topics which had emerged throughout the project around board functioning – their motivation levels, their work responsibilities and the board composition.

Dedicating time and space to delve in depth into their own areas of concern gave board directors the opportunity to build understanding, share their positions and concerns and start to consider how to deal with the issues. They engaged fully in these small groups, however, when time came to exchange thoughts and engage as a full board, they became far less forthcoming This reflected their existing dynamic of holding back, very possibly a demonstration of the "dependence" the Browning and Sparks' model (2015) had suggested, and indicated there was work still to be done in shifting this. Returning to Shaw's argument that reflection and action cannot be seen as separate, I understood this holding back (action) as related to the degree of their reflection on the topics. They discussed and shared with one another what they felt was meaningful for them each about being on this board. This discussion led to an exploration of the energy levels felt at board meetings, which was much lower than the general energy in the office during the day. They contemplated the difference, and why the passion they felt for the cause wasn't translating into more lively board meetings.

My intention had been to work towards the creation of a collective sense of meaning, but this discussion was a building block. It was a collective self-examination. They were sharing their feelings, their thoughts and questions, and pondering together what it meant. It was a significant step, as spending time and creating space for reflection elevated the question of meaningfulness from a personal fancy or unconscious motivation to an intentional position which they could and did share with one another, allowing collective observation of their own behaviour.

In a last-minute decision, the Board Chair and ED had decided to convene an official board meeting directly after the session. This would allow them to officially vote on the name selected, but it also meant our time together wasn't going to end with the session I designed, and the facilitation I was offering was not going to be able to bring the session to a close in a way conducive to cohesion and integration. This was another moment where the paradox of being in control and not being in control became apparent. I had a plan, but things were not going to unfold as I had intended. Indeed, despite last minute alterations to the session plan, it didn't have a proper closing at all. During the name selection process the board realised there was a conflict in their name choice with a partner organisation, and the dilemma of how to proceed turned into a fractious, tension-driven board meeting.

There were two important implications of how this unfolded. One implication was that the work done reflecting and discussing together about themselves as a governing board felt diminished without having had a proper closing for the process to land, be fully absorbed, and for them to take stock together of where they were at. Not only had there not been enough time in the project to fully develop an intentional and collective sense of meaning, but the work now felt like it had occurred in a colander rather than a bowl. It is commonly accepted that successful facilitation requires the creation of a container for effective processes to occur (Bushe, 2010). Having ended without time to think through and collectively reflect on all that had unfolded in the project, the container I had created felt "leaky." The rich contents of the sessions were not given as much chance to take root, which is what a solid closing can do. Rather like a story finishing without a conclusion to tie all the threads together.

However, seeing the paradox of forming interactions and also being formed by them, the second implication was that they interrupted their existing pattern of an abrupt stop without resolution. This time, they experienced disorder, conflict and confusion, but kept going until a final decision was made about the name. There was disappointment and frustration, but these were voiced and addressed, unlike in their usual pattern. The board had begun this process months earlier. I had joined the process weeks before, still unresolved and conflictual. However, the conversation had not been terminated at that point, as commitment had been made to complete the decision-making process together with me, and the email conversation allowed continued contribution. Now they returned to the topic, having aired concerns about their overall board dynamics, discussing these concerns and considering what was drawing them together. Finding a resolution involved a messy process of disagreement and disappointment and left one director close to leaving the board. However, using the time which I had planned to bring closure and build community, the board waded through their conflict and emerged with a new name, all directors still part of the board, and an experience of working together to reach their goal. The system evolved with a spontaneous shift. Visualising their fractal helix, I saw a new iteration emerge. Enough difference in the system existed for their coherent, yet ever changing, pattern to develop.

Extension, Recycle or Closure

As this consulting project was in support of a Master’s degree and on an academic schedule, there was no scope for extending the project. Closure happened in two stages, first as the final session closed, and second through the chance to give feedback.

Closure with the client was undoubtedly the weakest phase of the project. The final session design had to be altered at the last minute with the newly scheduled board meeting to occur immediately after, and I did not put enough preparation into the different possible outcomes of the board meeting being directly after the session. As a result, there was insufficient space for collective reflection and absorption of the project as a whole. The closing-out phase was compressed into little more than an exhausted, post-board meeting moment of thanks, feedback information and farewells.

A follow-up of feedback was scheduled for two weeks hence. The purpose of this was two-fold: on one side it was an opportunity for the consultant to gain insight and learning, and on another side, it was an opportunity for board members to contemplate the project from a slightly greater distance and through answering the questions spend time reflecting on their experience. To this end, I created questions which required reflection and articulation of their experience, as opposed to simply scaled or tick box responses. The intention and hope was that this would offer a further layer of integration, an iteration of the ripples of change I had witnessed in their interaction. The board directors were each sent an online feedback form, asking for ratings with thoughts on their experiences, and myself, the Board Chair and ED had an in-person meeting to discuss our collective thoughts and experiences. The feedback through both of these channels was primarily positive with high ratings and comments reflecting appreciation for the different perspectives they were exposed to, the opportunities for both self-reflection and discussing concerns. The areas for improvement focused primarily on needing more time for addressing their topics of concern, for discussions and the need to speak up more when all together.

Discussion

This project brought learning in three different areas. First, in finding a research gap relating meaningfulness to board governance work. Second, as a case study in using complex responsive processes of relating as lens for consulting. And third, through a number of particularities of this project, and what could have been better.

I turn first to the gap of meaningfulness in governing board literature. Scouring library bookshelves literally filled with volumes on boards and governance, I found not a single chapter focusing on the relevance of meaningfulness for board performance. There is plenty of research indicating that paid employees perform better when their work has value to them and makes sense within the greater context of their lives. Indeed, there are arguments, as presented earlier, which question the validity of such meaning in our societal structure, but whether an artificial construct or a deeply held truth, no one is saying it's irrelevant. Yet, where it comes to the performance of board, no one is talking about it. Voluntary boards might attract people who care, even care deeply, about the organisation's cause. However, as the plethora of literature on how boards can function better demonstrates, once sitting around a board table together, what happens to those feelings? As Mina (2009) states

> What makes Boardroom problems especially puzzling is the fact that, as individuals, many Board members are educated, accomplished, and highly dedicated to their organizations. Some are prominent and respected community leaders. But put them together in a setting where they must share decision-making power with others, and you often get trouble. (p. xv)

While there is small amount of literature addressing board purpose, I recommend taking this research further to continue making sense of apparently intractable problems. I propose a key aspect of intervention with non-profit boards requires delving into meaningfulness. This is an important step towards making sense of apparently intractable problems. I propose taking another step, and delving into meaningfulness. Experience from this case study indicates that board directors have an awareness of individual meaningfulness, but translating this into the practical work, holding on to it and sharing it when imperfect structures and complicated dynamics start getting in the way, becomes difficult. Dealing with structure is essential. Dealing with team dynamics is essential. But dealing with meaning seems an inextricable part of creating and maintaining both of these.

In this case study, there were several examples of the interplay between structure and meaningfulness. The first indication of structural shifts occurred after the committee session in which meaningfulness was explicitly, collectively discussed. The board meeting following that session was conducted differently – space for questions, ED report summarised, checking for comprehension. After the one-to-one session with the Executive Director discussing among other things, the meaning in her role, she altered her monthly report format, hugely impacting board meetings. Furthermore, after the final session, again in which the participants engaged with their sense of meaning in their roles, one director voted against a motion- something I had not witnessed once since being involved with this organisation. To me, this was a demonstration of gaining agency and voice and having the confidence that the structures available were tools to use in performing board responsibilities. These are but slivers of evidence supporting the idea that acknowledging, making explicit and ultimately creating a collective narrative around meaningfulness can impact governing board performance, and I recommend further research into this impact of meaningfulness on board performance.

A second area of learning was through delving into complex responsive processes of relating and its accompanying research approach, emerging participative exploration. This is a fairly new theoretical frame. Developed less than twenty years ago, in my view, it is more of a fine tuning, tweaking and bringing together salient theories of psychology and complexity and using the essence of being human to make sense of and improve how we work together. As Christensen (2005) states, “Emerging participative exploration is first of all a way of taking our ordinary daily experiences as relating human beings seriously, and is grounded in a need to make sense of identity and difference and the themes that emerge in conversations in daily work” (p. 100). The ways in which we understand who we are as humans and how we work together are constantly shifting as new ideas form and trends change. Right now, a dominant narrative, certainly in industrialised modern society, centres on self-actualisation, agency and aligning internal values with meaningful work. Finding ways to navigate this, make sense of it and study it in organisations, is tricky business. Complex responsive processes of relating is not about bringing humanity into organisations or about creating a positive narrative, it is using the reality of our humanity to make sense of how we organise. This case study was an introductory experience into working from a perspective of complex responsive processes of relating.

The final area of learning to outline is that which comes from reflection and acknowledgment of weakness in the project. I identify three primary learnings in this category – the project goal, the impact of closure and the need for simplicity.

First, I contracted with a board of directors to help them gain greater clarity around their transition from an operational to a governing structure. This is a rather ephemeral goal, and indeed, there lies my first learning. Considering the limited scope of the project and that this was a board who meet monthly, the simple constraint of time was relevant as both conceptual integration and practical implementation of change would have been needed to claim success. There was undoubtedly progress made towards this goal, yet in small steps. The board was questioning their existing structures and experimenting with changing them. They were voicing concerns which had previously remained silent and were taking stock of what was meaningful for them and where their passion lay. Perhaps most importantly, they had taken the time to reflect and make sense together.

The second learning was around messy incomplete closures. Both the discovery and the final sessions ended without the purposeful drawing together of the activities and events of the session. The discovery session was an indication for me of an existing dynamic in the group. I even had a warning before the final session that a board meeting was going to ensue immediately after, but still I didn't manage to create the space for such a profoundly important part of sense-making and building cohesion and capacity. While something else important did happen in that space, with the maturation of the group dynamic, it came at a cost. I believe that with better foresight, both could have been achieved.

Finally, what this project lacked the most, was simplicity. There were just too many threads going at the same time. We were looking at the board structures and meaningfulness around their understanding of governing, at the same time we engaged in the monumental task of selecting a new name for the organisation, all the while I was using a lens new for me, with complex responsive processes. Drucker (1980/2010b) penned another essay entitled "How to guarantee non-performance"- and his second of ten points was *Trying to do Several Things at Once*. I enjoyed the irony. And the lesson. I believe I could possibly have served this board better had I reduced my focus to one single thing. And my next goal is to develop the skill of amplifying a single thread and making it tangible, practical and implementable.

Conclusion

I don't believe the board I worked with was bored at all, despite sometimes looking like it. They were dedicated, they cared deeply, and they undoubtedly wanted to make the most of the organisation. The question for me was about what happened to that passion when they sat around the board table. This became the structures component of the inquiry. What structures could support, rather than mute, their energy? Then I asked how we could access the source of their energy, the meaning which drew them to this work in the first place? By developing these two strands of inquiry, I discovered they influenced one another. Connecting to meaningfulness and accessing useful structures simultaneously, could make the board's development more powerful.

I also confirmed my suspicion that complex responsive process of relating is a subtle but powerful way of understanding the movement which connects people. Something like entering a river you are trying to understand, rather than floating down it on a boat. I was able to make sense of the organisation by seeing the tensions, the ripples, the different flows all around me as I engaged with them. It wasn't about bringing in control or a better plan, but creating some counter tensions for the water to flow differently, making explicit and talking through experiences and beliefs, and finding ways to accept the reality of everyday paradoxes.

I believe I left the board in a better place than when I joined them. I wouldn't suggest they had full clarity around their governing role, but I did witness changes suggesting increased clarity. And most importantly, they were asking questions which they hadn't been asking before I arrived. This was a new iteration of their fractal pattern, primed to continue shifting and changing.

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