



## Case Study: the Impact of Poor Governance Arrangements

### Scenario

The community sector agency has a long and enviable record of service to disabled young people. It is not a specialist service and supports clients with a wide range of disabilities. Its "niche" is to provide services to young people, beyond secondary school age, and the older disabled. Services range from the purely activity based to more vocationally orientated efforts. It runs a number of facilities in metropolitan locations and is entirely government funded.

The federal government funding arrangements are shifting to a "competitive tendering" process for the future and the agency is concerned to review its strategy to address this external environment and to explore new service directions and funding options.

In the year preceding the strategic planning process the agency had recruited a range of new Board members embodying skills sets believed to be needed by the organisation. Historically the Board had been made up entirely of family members of clients.

The agency has an impressive executive team, made up of highly skilled individuals with diverse employment histories; sometimes in senior executive positions in the private sector; and a demonstrated commitment to the agency and its clients.

### The Issues

The engagement was to assist the agency with the development of its Strategic Plan . The Board strategy workshop was preceded with a series of key informant interviews to tease out the issues presenting for the agency and its clientele. In the course of this activity and from a variety of sources some matters of concern were revealed. In several instances the concerns were hinted at, disguised and tentative. More by intuition and experience than direct communication the Metanoia Consulting team suspected underlying tensions.

These provisional findings were explored with the CEO and Board Chair in direct discussion. The result was broad agreement that the agency was divided in its focus between the needs of the disabled clients and the needs of families for respite care to support them in their highly demanding role of caring for the disabled family member. Several commentators had noted staff turnover as a recurring issue for the agency and suggested that low job satisfaction was a factor.

A number of the key informants had revealed their view that the agency should consider gradually moving to a new service offering. The parents of the aging disabled clients were themselves aging and the uncertainty of the arrangements for their children after their deaths was a source of anxiety and distress. A supported accommodation service was viewed as a valuable service for the future with strong prospects of government funding and significant growth in the agency's asset base.



The Board workshop was designed to tease out the implications of the divided Purpose of the agency. A workbook inviting discussion of the agency's Purpose was prepared and distributed.

#### The Workshop

The workshop process did not go well. The majority of Board members were parents of disabled clients. The complex emotional issues at play created boundary issues for them. In several instances the facilitator was required to intervene when family/Board members dismissed input from newer recruited Board members who were making contributions based on their skills sets.

The process revealed serious Governance issues for the agency. The Board as a group was unprepared to separate the disabled clients and the families into distinct beneficiary or stakeholder groupings. Their reluctance to do so was based in normal human emotions, including guilt and denial. But it resulted in important strategy options being dismissed out of hand.

The consultant was required to adapt the workshop to the needs of the Board rather than the needs of the agency and its beneficiaries. No progress was being achieved by pressing the Board in the workshop and the process needed to be "rescued" so that the best possible result was achieved for the client. It would be inappropriate and deeply questionable for the consultant to try to impose their preferred outcome on the client.

#### Analysis

The problem did not lie with there being more than one beneficiary group. It was the lack of willingness to discuss this reality and explore its implications which created a problem for the agency.

As a result conflicts and tensions between the needs and expectations of the two beneficiary groups (families and disabled clients) were not explored. The root cause of these consequences was the deficiencies in governance arrangements at the Board level. The majority of Board members were confused and conflicted over their roles as a "parent" and a Board member.

Boundaries had not been set and discussed and the opportunity for these issues to be explored and perhaps rectified was not presented. The engagement was for strategic planning not governance review.

Board members were wearing "two hats", whether consciously or not. A large measure of "Group Think" had taken hold at the Board and diversity of input from "outsiders" was neither respected nor considered.

Among the consequences of the existing governance arrangements were:

- The retention of a range of strategy settings and statements which might look good on paper, but served to disguise underlying issues.
- The failure to explore important strategy options, including the possible restructure of the agency to offer a range of services which may have been of great mutual value to the two sets of beneficiaries.
- The shifting of responsibility away from the Board and onto individual staff members to negotiate mixed messages and lack of clarity on key operational issues for the agency.



- The temptation for the employees and Executive (common in cases of “Group Think”) to tell the Board what they want to hear rather than what they need to know.
- The prospect of “burning off” external members, recruited for their skills and wisdom. “Group Think” can become insidious and self-perpetuating by limiting the scope for succession planning/Board recruitment/retention.
- Limitations on the Board’s capacity to set and monitor strategy and manage risks to which the agency was exposed.
- High levels of dependency on a charismatic and highly regarded Board Chair who was intent on standing down from that position at the next annual general meeting.

#### The Result

The Board were generally “happy” with the result in terms of strategy. A workable outcome was achieved which the agency felt met its immediate needs. Metanoia Consulting remains convinced that it was less than could have been achieved if the Purpose debate had been fully explored. But it is not the consultant’s business to take over or colonise the client’s strategy. The job is to do the best for the client in the circumstances and within the limits set.

The engagement was for strategic planning but the underlying issues were governance. Within the scope of the engagement there was strictly limited opportunity to address the more fundamental underlying governance issues. Both sets of issues revolve around the discussion of the true Purpose of the agency. Who are the beneficiaries? What is the benefit they derive?

In keeping with its Values and Ethics, Metanoia Consulting did extend itself to address the perceived shortfalls in governance arrangements. This was done through a series of conversations with the Board Chairman and members of the senior executive team during the course of preparation of the report on the strategic planning process. This was a value add beyond the strict scope of the engagement but one which Metanoia felt bound to offer under its Values of Contribution and Authenticity.

*This case study is based on a real situation which presented for an organization but details have been changed to preserve confidentiality.*

*For this reason a different version of this case study appears under the Strategy Service area.*

*For a discussion of “Purpose” see the related article in the area you are now browsing “The Point of the Purpose in Strategy”.*

*Workbooks are regular features in the Metanoia Consulting method. They encourage transparency and invite reflection prior to workshops and assist with timely reporting.*