A Legacy of Excellence: 
Board Governance at the Aboriginal Healing Foundation

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The Institute On Governance (IOG) is a Canadian, non-profit think tank that provides an independent source of knowledge, research and advice on governance issues, both in Canada and internationally.

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Introduction

In January 1998, as a follow-up to its Statement of Reconciliation, the Government of Canada announced Gathering Strength – Canada’s Aboriginal Action Plan. The objective of the Statement and Plan was to begin a process of reconciliation with Aboriginal peoples in Canada. At the forefront of this reconciliation initiative was the need to understand the legacy of residential schools. Accordingly, the Action Plan provided a $350 million fund for healing projects.

Following discussions with survivors of the residential school system, descendents of survivors, members of the healing community and leading Aboriginal representative organizations about the most appropriate way to use the fund, the government created the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF). Launched on March 31, 1998, the Foundation had a mandate to allocate the fund and ensure oversight and proper management of the community-based healing projects it supported. The mandate was subsequently extended and an additional $165 million has been allocated to the fund.

Since its inception, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation has been committed to supporting community-based Aboriginal healing. The Foundation’s mission is: to encourage and support Aboriginal people in building and reinforcing sustainable healing processes that address the Legacy of Physical Abuse and Sexual Abuse in the Residential School system, including intergenerational impacts.\(^1\)

The Foundation does this by providing resources for healing initiatives, by promoting awareness, not only of the history of Residential Schools but also of healing issues and needs in Canada, and by encouraging a supportive public environment in Canada. Its ultimate vision is creating communities where those affected by the Legacy of Physical Abuse and Sexual Abuse experienced in Residential Schools have addressed the effects of unresolved trauma in meaningful terms, have broken the cycle of abuse, and have enhanced their capacity as individuals, families, communities and nations to sustain their well being and that of future generations.\(^2\)

Based on this vision, the Foundation has funded projects in areas including: direct healing activities, prevention and awareness, training, honouring history and building knowledge, needs assessments, conferences and project design and setup.

In 2008, the Institute On Governance (IOG), an independent Ottawa-based think tank, was engaged by the AHF to evaluate the governance structure, policies and operations of the Board. The IOG study concluded that the AHF Board had been remarkably successful in fusing Aboriginal values and worldviews with mainstream good governance practices with positive results for its client group, the Government of Canada, the AHF staff and finally for the members of the Board themselves. The purpose of this brief is to expand on this finding so that organizations - both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – might benefit from the AHF experience.\(^3\)

Challenges

The principal challenge facing the AHF has been the enormity of its healing mission, summarized in a recent AHF research report:

*The healing movement among Aboriginal people in Canada is perhaps the most profound example of social reform since Confederation. The potential impact of the movement – for all Canadians and especially Aboriginal people – is profound. The efforts to re-stabilize Aboriginal societies after centuries of damaging government policies continue to revitalize individuals and communities that, in turn, contribute to a healthy and vibrant future.*

In pursuing this healing mission, the AHF was faced with a number of governance hurdles:

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\(^1\) Aboriginal Healing Foundation Website, [http://www.ahf.ca/about-us/mission](http://www.ahf.ca/about-us/mission)

\(^2\) Ibid

\(^3\) This Policy Brief is based on a longer study available on the IOG web site: [http://www.iog_Aboriginalgovernance/publications](http://www.iog_Aboriginalgovernance/publications)
Establishing a new board of directors, some of whom had little experience in board governance and many of whom had attended residential schools and were in need of their own personal healing

Operating in a pan-Aboriginal environment, where political organizations representing First Nations, Inuit and Métis have political agendas that are not always compatible and where cultural diversity is great

Administering a $.5 billion fund to a target group which often had limited administrative capacity and was situated across Canada, sometimes in remote locations

Having virtually no model of other successful pan-Aboriginal organizations from which to draw lessons and best practices

Principal Governance Strengths

In its extensive work on board governance in the not for profit sector, the IOG has identified 10 characteristics of high performing boards that can be applied to any not-for-profit board. High performing boards:

1. develop and maintain a longer term vision and a clear sense of direction
2. ensure the prevalence of high ethical standards and understand their legal obligations
3. ensure effective performance through sound information
4. ensure the financial and organizational health
5. ensure effective relationships with key external bodies
6. ensure sound relationships with members and clients, providing opportunities for them to influence key initiatives
7. manage risk effectively
8. maintain high standards of accountability
9. ensure the soundness of governance systems
10. have an effective board chair and committee chairs

Successful Aboriginal organizations require an additional characteristic: namely the incorporation of Aboriginal values and worldviews in significant aspects of the work of their boards.

Through an in-depth interview program the IOG asked current and past board members, staff and individuals from stakeholder groups to rate how the AHF board fared in these 11 characteristics using a scale of one to six (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=disagree somewhat, 4= agree somewhat, 5= agree, 6=strongly agree).

The data collected yielded impressive results with an average rating of 5.6 across the 11 characteristics – a remarkable outcome and one that the IOG has rarely seen in its work with boards. The following section summarizes some of factors underlying this achievement.

The AHF Board Mirrors the Mission

Recognizing that some of the Board members themselves need to heal from their residential school experiences, the Board adopted the practice of a ‘sharing circle’ which opens all Board meetings. It is a powerful tool for members to connect, share and help one another in their individual healing journeys. The practice is, in a sense, a realization of the notion of harmony, an important value shared by all Aboriginal groups. In the sharing circle, Board members are asked to talk about something from their personal life, whether positive or negative. Topics can be as diverse as the joy of greeting a new grandchild to the feeling of grief over the death of a close friend.

The Board also has a modest fund to permit its Board members, if they so choose, to embark on healing initiatives of their own, thus mirroring its overall mandate of acting as a catalyst for healing in communities.

All Board meetings are opened and closed by an Elder who leads a prayer. Further, the Board included a youth representative to ensure that the youth perspective is captured. The Board has also sought to recruit board members who were direct survivors of the residential schools.

A Cohesive Pan-Aboriginal Organization

The AHF Board has found a way to reconcile the needs and accommodate the diverse interests (and the sometimes competing political agendas) of First
Nations peoples, the Métis and Inuit. The practice of having Elders from each group sit at the Board table, as well as ensuring that each national representative organization has the opportunity to appoint a member to the Board, have been helpful. Further, the organization’s approach to project funding, that ensures not only regional diversity but also diversity of recipient groups, has built cohesion within the organization and broad-based community support.

Holding annual accountability sessions with each of the national organizations has also promoted positive relationships with these key political bodies. Finally, the Board has remained vigilant about ensuring that a duty of loyalty to the organization supersedes any inclination on the part of Board members to advance narrower interests.

**Focus on Relationship Building**

According to interviewees in the IOG study, the Board and senior staff have done an excellent job of building relationships both with national and regional representative organizations and with member and client groups. The AHF has been especially innovative in its approach to connecting with people at the grassroots level. When Board or staff visit communities, they make efforts to understand the values and customs in that region. Some communities have asked that healing projects contain more of an Aboriginal approach to healing. Consequently, the AHF has engaged community members whenever possible to ensure their values and cultural perspectives are included. In addition, Board and staff have consulted community members at regional gatherings and encouraged them to provide input on funding criteria for projects, as well as for the Code of Conduct used by the AHF Board and staff. These regional gatherings have evolved into collaborative focus groups, set up to create networks in regions and identify best practices that can be shared across the country.

**Transparency and Accountability**

The Board has made accountability and transparency a priority and the AHF website is evidence of that openness. The site offers all of the governance documents, annual reports, evaluations of the organization, and information about every funded project since the organization was founded. The Board has also been diligent about going out to the community to meet clients, answer questions and share information about the Foundation. Finally, the Board has managed the relationship with its funder, the federal government, in an effective fashion through scrupulous reporting and ongoing communication, provided in part by having a government-appointed board member.

Complementing its focus on transparency has been the AHF Board’s emphasis on maintaining high ethical standards through adoption and close attention to a Code of Conduct and to policies aimed at preventing nepotism. For example, the AHF will not fill staff positions with individuals related to board members.

**Effective Management of Resources**

That the organization is successfully managing almost $500 million with virtually no financial management problems is significant. The effective use of a Finance Committee, the hiring of competent staff, the ethic of funding capacity versus need, the use of ‘on the ground’ personnel to monitor problematic projects – have all led to this excellent financial record, topped off by a solid string of unqualified audits.

**The Relationship of the Chair and Executive Director**

The relationship between the Chair and the Executive Director is an important one that is emphasized in the literature on non-profit organizations. In the case of the AHF, the two have both been with the organization since its inception. Many of the IOG interviewees credited the Chair and the Executive Director with establishing the positive culture and tone of the organization, providing sound leadership and ensuring that the Board and the staff of the organization respectively, have worked toward the realization of the mission. The continuity of the Chair and the Executive Director with the organization is also true for many of the Board members. Most have served on the
Board for a considerable period of time, some since the founding of the AHF in 1998.

Benefits and Impacts

On funding recipients

Recent evaluations of the AHF program reveal positive impacts on the target group. A sample of 140 participants in AHF projects, for example, showed that more than 85% felt their project provided welcoming and safe environments for healing and some three-quarters felt programs helped them handle difficult issues, resolve past trauma, prepare for future trauma and secure support. Asked to rank the effectiveness of healing approaches, interview participants revealed a mix of both mainstream and Aboriginal practices - another indicator of the Board’s successful fusion of Aboriginal and mainstream values, worldviews and practices.

On the Relationship with the Government of Canada

The Board’s scrupulous attention to sound accountability, strategic planning and stakeholder relationships has paid dividends in its relationship with the Government of Canada. Government officials interviewed in the IOG study were positive in their assessment of the Board’s effectiveness in terms of the IOG characteristics for high performing boards. The AHF’s string of unqualified audits supported this assessment as did the fact that the AHF received only positive references (in contrast to several other foundations) in a 2005 report of the Auditor General on “Accountability of Foundations”.

On the Relationship with Aboriginal stakeholder groups

The AHF has enjoyed strong support from Aboriginal political representative bodies both at the national level and in various regions across Canada.

On Board members and staff

The challenges facing a pan-Aboriginal organization in accommodating the cultural values of the people it serves are significant. The practice of including Elders on the Board in an advisory capacity on behalf of Métis, Inuit and First Nations was an effective way to help address the diversity in Aboriginal cultures in Canada, as was the concept of the ‘sharing circle’. Such a practice is distinctly Aboriginal. In non-Aboriginal organizations a sustained practice of personal sharing at something like a board meeting would likely be considered inappropriate, especially when it occurs in such a formalized way. Nonetheless, the results are impressive. Many board members used the word ‘family’ to describe the AHF and more than one noted that sitting on the AHF board was their best board experience by far.

Conclusion

No human enterprise is ever perfect and the AHF board is no exception. The IOG study noted that the board should spend more time on improving its information on program outcomes, that is, the impact the AHF is having on its client group. Further, the board needs to improve its evaluation processes of its own performance as a board. The IOG study was the first formal evaluation of the board in ten years. Further, there are no established procedures to provide feedback to individual board members on their performance.

These suggestions, however, should not diminish a remarkable achievement of this board: the effective fusion of Aboriginal values and principles with non-Aboriginal governance structure, a fusion which appears to be critical to the success of Aboriginal boards. As a government funded agency it is bound by the government’s notions of good governance. Yet, as an Aboriginal organization it must also find a way to incorporate the values and worldviews of Inuit, First Nations and Métis peoples in Canada in order to claim legitimacy with its client groups and other Aboriginal stakeholders. To that end, the organization has been successful,

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no mean feat considering its sensitive mission, its pan-Aboriginal focus with all of the attendant political baggage such a focus entails and the relative paucity of other successful models.