

# Bookshelf

HEATHER HISEY, *Editor*

*Torys, Barristers and Solicitors LLP, Toronto, Canada*

---

## **Better Together: Restoring the American Community**

*By Robert D. Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein with Don Cohen*

*Published by Simon & Schuster, 2003, 318 pp. US \$41.95.*

REVIEWED BY YVES SAVOIE

*Executive Director, Family Service Association of Toronto*

---

Robert Putnam sparked a broad debate about the state of community with the publication, in 2000, of *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. In that book, he argued that the bonds and networks that unite citizens, generate trust, and sustain the norms of reciprocity that are fundamental to so many aspects of civic life are waning. In so doing, Putnam popularized the notion of social capital – a construct that speaks to the ability of individuals to secure benefits by virtue of membership in networks. He also generated alarm about the need to replenish its stock.

The notion of social capital is an important one for those interested in the voluntary sector. In many ways, voluntary sector institutions have served as an important nexus for the creation of social capital. Temples, amateur athletic leagues, schools, labour unions, cultural organizations, and political parties all have as foundations the networks and links that bring citizens together to build and improve community. Participation in community life – singing in a choir, worshipping at the local synagogue, or participating in the cleaning up of a public park – engenders opportunities to build social capital.

Putnam's critics argued that the quality of social life in America was strong and that the problem with *Bowling Alone* was that Putnam went looking in the wrong places for evidence of new forms of civic life. In *Better Together*, he redeems himself and writes a footnote.

*Better Together* is an informal search for new forms of social connections that are being invented to strengthen our communities. Illustrated through compelling stories and anecdotes, these new forms of social connection provide evidence of communities being rebuilt and getting stronger. Unlike Putnam's previous book, *Better Together* is not the culmination of a long research journey, nor is it an attempt at providing comprehensive evidence on the state of civic life in America.

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam focused his search on traditional forms of community and civic life: labour unions, service clubs, churches, and political parties. In *Better Together*, the path of discovery is less well marked. The story of large-scale neighbourhood revitalization projects blurs the line between community, nonprofit, and municipal actors and interests. Saddleback is the story of a mega-church (weekly attendance at services of 15,000), a new congregation built with modern marketing techniques to respond to the needs of today's churchgoers. In Chicago, the story of branch libraries provides evidence that the Internet can be an opportunity to bring libraries closer to the communities they serve. The large storage and transit facilities of UPS also provide ripe terrain for an exploration of new forms of social capital. In his search for new forms of social capital, Putnam also looks at approaches to renew civic life through neighbourhood associations in Portland, Oregon.

The stories are compelling. They provide hope that, while volunteer participation rates are falling, citizens are building community in different ways. Yet Putnam also reminds us that the separation of work and home, the long commutes associated with urban sprawl, and the reality of two-career families are forces that do not facilitate community building.

Putnam and Feldstein bring the power of fiction and storytelling to the challenge of renewing community in the United States. Canadians interested in renewing civic life and strengthening the voluntary sector can draw many lessons from these stories.

---

## **The Art of Trusteeship: The Nonprofit Board Member's Guide to Effective Governance**

*By Candace Widmer and Susan Houchin*

*Published by Jossey-Bass, 2000, pp. 208. US \$32.*

REVIEWED BY PAT BRADSHAW

*Director, MBA Program, Schulich School of Business, York University, Toronto, Canada*

ANN ATKEY

*Associate Director, MBA Program, Schulich School of Business, York University, Toronto, Canada*

---

This is a great book: well structured, useful, easy to read, with relevant examples and interwoven case studies. Clearly it has been written by people who are grounded in experience as consultants and practitioners. It is informed by research, but it is not abstract or academic. It communicates well to its

intended audience, which includes new and experienced nonprofit board members and the staff who work with them. The topics covered are the critical ones that all board trustees need to think about, regardless of the size or type of nonprofit they are governing. By focusing on the top ten board responsibilities, the authors avoid overwhelming the reader, and they provide constructive and applicable advice and direction.

We were taken by the clarity of the writing, which provides quick access to key ideas. Bulleted lists of questions and tasks are insightful and to the point. The assessment questions at the end of each chapter are excellent for helping the reader understand, focus, and reflect. As a useful way of engaging in self-assessment and learning, a board could have members read the book together and work through the questions as a group.

The book's structure makes it useful as a handbook and a quick reference. The introduction frames the authors' approach to exploring board roles and responsibilities. Three principles underlie their thinking: a contingency approach to nonprofit governance; a standard of conduct for trustees, including duties of care, loyalty, and obedience; and the focus of board attention on matters of critical importance, i.e., non-interference with day-to-day work of staff or volunteers.

Widmer and Houchin emphasize the challenges in relating to the principles. For example, the case for a contingency approach recognizes that every organization is different and many variables are in play, including organizational size, nature of stakeholders, size of board and number of committees, and environmental complexity, to name a few. The focus of board attention is not always straightforward. While the board should not interfere with the operational workings of the staff, sometimes it can't ignore them: "The advice to board members – 'eyes on, fingers out' – has a nice ring to it, but what if board members don't like what they see?" (p. xviii) They add, "In truth, one board's policy is another's implementation." These kinds of comments make the book resonate with the reader – there are no glib answers here. If we look between the lines, we can see that the briefly stated suggestions are signposts to deeper discussion.

Each of the book's three main sections discusses critical board responsibilities. Part One, about the board's responsibility for mission, packs a huge amount into a few pages. According to the authors, the board's responsibilities are establishing the mission, clearly articulating it, ensuring that everyone understands and supports it, monitoring progress toward achieving it, and modifying the mission when necessary and appropriate.

To help with establishing or reviewing the organization's mission, they advise trustees to address eight fundamental questions related to the organization: purpose; impact on lives of members or clients; values, beliefs and assumptions; experience and history; strengths and limitations; resources; programs

and services; and people to be served. Among trustees, finding agreement on answers is not a simple task, but the ensuing discussion will help build shared vision.

Widmer and Houchin offer tools for engaging people in a seven-step planning process: getting ready; assessing the organization and its environment; identifying and answering the critical questions; setting goals and selecting strategies; drafting the plan; implementing the plan; and evaluating results. Sub-points with key ideas and rationales support each step. For example, step two, assessing the organization and its environment, includes examining the organization's history, clarifying the mission, and conducting a classic SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis of the internal and external environments. More interestingly, step three, identifying and answering critical questions, includes discussing critical issues, converting them to questions, and then answering the questions. This is a potent approach. It may be a painful and divisive exercise for a board. Some answers will mean big changes to the organization's direction and activities, and no organization can do everything. However, these questions must be answered so that a path to the future can be chosen. There are no pat answers here, and there is an unresolved tension between the planning function and acknowledging the turbulent environment.

Part Two, about the board's responsibility for money, highlights three areas: overseeing the organization's finances, developing funds, and ensuring sound risk management policies. The last topic is of growing interest to volunteer trustees, and the authors provide a thoughtful approach. Once again, Widmer and Houchin lead with good questions and a list of identified areas for establishing a risk management program. To manage risk, they propose a number of possible strategies and their reasons: reduce or eliminate the exposure to risk; develop clear policies and procedures, and follow them; bear the risk; institute waiver and hold harmless agreements; and obtain insurance coverage. They also give tips for monitoring the program and for understanding risks to board members.

Part Three, about the board's responsibility for management, could also be called "getting the most out of people." It highlights three areas: selecting and supporting the chief executive officer, selecting and educating trustees, and managing the work of the board. Particularly useful is the section on selecting, recruiting, orienting, educating, retaining, and recognizing trustees. If a board thoughtfully uses the practices outlined in this book, its chances of having a strong organization are very good.

After reviewing the book, we asked ourselves: What else does a board need in order to be successful? Board members certainly need a common foundation from which to create shared understandings of objectives, approaches, and implementation systems. This book provides an excellent foundation for achieving this. However, the book is based on a set of underlying assumptions

on which the authors rely without clearly surfacing them. For example, the book is largely based on assumptions of rationality. Widmer and Houchin say that strategic planning can be described variously as having five or ten steps. In their book, they outline seven steps. It appears that they are not being prescriptive in doing so, but they are still working within the constraints of a rational, linear planning model. They suggest that it is possible to plan, set goals and objectives, and then work to achieve them. While they say planners must be flexible (p. 26), they do not take into account alternative approaches that are aimed at heightening flexibility.

Such assumptions of linear and rational planning work well in situations of relative stability, but less well in times of uncertainty or political conflict. In many cases the external environment of nonprofits is so uncertain, complex, and rapidly changing, that traditional planning becomes impossible; response and adaptation are the only options for moving forward and not getting stuck in inaction and rigidity. Even the best-run boards can be overtaken by the unexpected, paradoxical, and chaotic. If a board wanted to go another step beyond what is presented in this book, it might want to explore alternative mental models that go beyond assumptions of rationality.

New metaphors are being explored in strategic planning literature to take into account the flexibility required to deal with the increasingly turbulent environments of organizations. For example, in his book *Strategy Safari*, Henry Mintzberg (1998) names a metaphorical beast for each of ten schools of organizational strategy, ranging from prescriptive to descriptive. At the descriptive end, for the Learning School (monkey), strategies emerge in small steps as an organization adapts or “learns.” For the Power School (lion), strategy formation is a process of negotiation among people and with the external environment. For the Culture School (peacock), strategy is rooted in the organization’s culture. The Configuration School (chameleon) is integrative and clusters various elements of the strategy beast, with organizations moving from one state to another.

Being explicit about such alternatives to rational strategic planning would extend Widmer and Houchin’s recommendations and create space for nonprofit boards to engage alternative approaches. Some boards we know are exploring the role of chaos theory in creating alternatives that allow for emergent planning. These strategic planning processes build on complexity thinking, which is non-linear, intuitive, adaptive to turbulent environments, and includes a “both/and” approach. Using both rationality and complexity mindsets provides these board members with a wider range of options for addressing strategic issues. While a rational model will be better suited to some purposes, a complexity model will be better suited to others. There are tensions inherent in using both: logic vs. creativity, linear thinking vs. generative thinking, deliberateness vs. emergence (building strategy on what has emerged), evolution vs. revolution, and so on. However, a board willing to engage in the messy

business of multiple approaches will have an even richer offering from which to draw.

Another challenge, as we see it, is for nonprofit boards is to push beyond the framework proposed by Widmer and Houchin and see if they can take up the challenge of the contingent (“it all depends”) approach that the book hints at but does not fully develop. Widmer and Houchin argue that even though all boards have the same responsibilities and duties, they can organize differently to accomplish them, depending on their characteristics and values. Thus, the book should be read as a set of minimum specifications (min specs) for what the board must do and be accountable for (mission, money, and management). The authors do not intend to lay out a strict set of limitations on how to structure or organize a board. They nicely avoid the debate about policy governance, and focus on what is critical for all trustees to do with regard to their duties of care, loyalty, and obedience. What the book does not claim to cover, and what still needs to be written about, is how best to organize given unique organizational characteristics and how to choose the most appropriate governance model for an organization. The authors acknowledge that this is a very difficult task, and the reader could use more help with this.

While this overall guidance and a fully articulated contingency framework are missing, what the book nicely avoids are dogmatic assertions that what they say is the one and only approach or the normative best way. There are many examples of statements that include the word “should,” but they are usually tempered and softened to take into account the uniqueness of the organizational context. For example, in the section on strategic planning Widmer and Houchin say, “strategic planning *should* be done from scratch at regular intervals” (p. 14). But this is tempered by saying that “it is sometimes appropriate for a board to delay the process” and they *should* be sure the benefits of planning out weigh the costs. They point out the paradox that strategic planning is often most important when it is also most difficult. Such recognition of the competing pressures and paradoxes, and the impossibility of meeting all the “shoulds,” make this book balanced, sensible, and kind. Recognition of the challenges of good governance is embedded in the heart of this book, and it makes the reader confident that the writers have been there and struggled with the issues in the real world, rather than having cooked up a set of prescriptions that are impossible to implement.

Having a sense of the ideal, but also taking into account reality, makes this book unique. We also find that the authors challenge readers to look at their own justifications and rationalizations. For example, they ask trustees to assess whether strategic planning is difficult because of environmental chaos or because they are avoiding something that appears to be “impossible, distasteful, or divisive.” Their advice is to just “begin” the process of strategic planning. We can’t think of plainer and more constructive advice that is based on empathy and realism.

In conclusion, this book sets the stage and lays out the requirements for good governance practices that all boards must be held accountable for achieving. All board trustees are well advised to study this book carefully, and reflect on how they are doing, before innovating. New models will only work if they build on solid foundations of good governance practice, and this book defines such practice.