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# BOARDS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Dr John Carver is a theorist, consultant, and arguably the world’s most published author on the design of governance by boards.

Not the usual, relatively light-hearted business book, but a slightly more academic text, Carver’s book *Boards That Make a Difference*’ is aimed primarily at non-profit and public sector organisations. However, private organisations can benefit from the advice and theories offered by Carver in this third edition of his 1990 book.

“**Boards That Make a Difference can help your board empower both board and staff**, eliminate trivia, establish a meaningful organisational direction, clarify roles, plan productive meetings, establish officers and committees that work, and provide the leadership for which governing boards exist.”

Carver is the creator of the “most well-known, well-respected, and talked about governance model in the world – **the Policy Governance model**” and he is spoken of very highly indeed amongst boards of various companies worldwide.

To summarise for those who are not familiar with this model, “...reduced to its minimum, the purpose of governance is to ensure, usually on behalf of others, that an organisation achieves what it should achieve while avoiding those behaviours and situations that should be avoided.”

‘*Boards That Make a Difference*’ is not a book about boards, councils and commissions and the way they are, but more about how they could be by following Carver’s advice and using his model.

Carver’s concern is that “Board members arrive at the table with dreams. They have vision and values. In many cases, their fervently held beliefs and sincere desire to make a difference impel them to board membership in the first place. City council persons want to increase the benefits of citizenship, school board members want to prepare children for life...**Yet, by and large, board members do not spend their time exploring, debating, and defining these dreams. Instead, they expend their energy on a host of demonstrably less important, even trivial, items.**”

You may well have got this far and be thinking “this holds no relevance to me” but Carver reminds us that “it is virtually impossible to escape contact with boards. We are on boards, work for them, or are affected by their decisions. Boards sit atop almost all corporate forms of organisation – profit and non-profit – and often over governmental agencies as well.”

*‘Boards That Make a Difference’* is not a book of ideas and theories on how to change the way boards function but “calls for a profound transformation in the way we think about and practice the governance of organisations. It is not a book of tips but a description of a **governance system that departs radically from the norm.**”

So, what does this transformation entail? Often too much time is spent by the board on the trivial. “It seems obvious that the board’s primary concern should be the benefits for people. But in the usual routine, programs, projects, activities, and methods demand so much attention that boards virtually neglect the benefits for people that justify the organisation’s existence in the first place!”

Have a ‘conscious strategy’ –focus on the future and not just on the here and now.

Let others lead –allow them to make decisions. “Emphasizing the avoidance of errors rather than the creation of breakthroughs propagates not leaders but followers.” View governance as empowerment.

**The passion, enthusiasm and commitment must start with the board.** “The leadership must keep the dream out in front so that board members always see mundane things like budgets and audits in the context of the overall effects that they have convened to achieve.

This mentality is best achieved when no board meeting goes by without a debate or presentation on some facet of the end development process.

**“The central reason for board meetings, after all, is to define what difference the organisation should make in the world.”**

Make a difference!

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