

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Book Reviews : Nonprofit Organization Governance: A Challenge in Turbulent Times. by W. Astor Kirk. (Carlton Press, New York, NY, 1986, 208 pp.) \$9.95, cloth

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6jr4m5nw>

Journal

Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 16(3)

ISSN

0899-7640

Author

Pearce, Jone L

Publication Date

1987-07-01

DOI

10.1177/089976408701600313

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Nonprofit Organization Governance: A Challenge in Turbulent Times. by W. Astor Kirk. (Carlton Press, New York, NY, 1986, 208 pp.) \$9.95, cloth.

It is difficult to conceive of a more amorphous, uncertain, frustrating job than the governance of a nonprofit organization. What are the board's responsibilities? We have all heard the generalities: that it is to "set policy." But what does that mean, exactly? Further, the ambiguity of policy making that is inherent in all boards is made worse for nonprofit boards. At least private business boards know they represent the owners, and these board members have a pretty clear idea of what owners want—profits. But what of nonprofit board members? They represent "society," but what exactly does "society" want from this nonprofit organization? The opportunities for differences of opinion are endless: Our mission is to provide shelter for the homeless, but this says nothing about what kind of shelter and for how long, or even what activities, if any, we should take to develop longer-term solutions to homelessness. The very missions that nonprofit organizations undertake are usually the most urgent (and chronically underfunded), and yet also the most ambiguous, with few clear "output" measures, and subject to deep differences of opinion about priorities.

As an academic who has thought and written about nonprofit board effectiveness, and as a current board member for a local nonprofit organization, I welcome a book such as *Nonprofit Organization Governance* that provides concrete guidelines for nonprofit board members. It provides specific advice for a particular kind of problem nonprofit boards may face; for instance, an unclear mission, clients, or donors. However, the book's strength is also its limitation.

Kirk brings to the book years of experience with a federal grant-making agency and with numerous community action agencies, and now as president of his own policy management services consulting firm. The book reports the framework and guidelines he has developed as a consultant to the governing boards of community action agencies and, in fact, devotes the last chapter to a discussion of these "quasi nongovernmental organizations."

The book's theme is the importance of focusing on results (the word is capitalized throughout the book). He provides questions and frameworks that board members

can follow to clarify their missions, identify their clients, and develop measurable objectives.

He repeatedly emphasizes the importance of focusing on results rather than activities and speaks of a "commitment to action" rather than plans and processes. Chapter 2, which provides guidelines, questions, and profiles concerning the kinds of client/customer and donor/subsidy environments facing a nonprofit organization, was particularly useful. For example, he provides a chart with which the reader can analyze the "pluses," "minuses," "opportunities," and "threats" (PMOT) which the organization currently faces. Chapter 3 moves on with guidelines for analyzing the future "RESULTS the organization intends to accomplish (or ROITA)." The fourth chapter discusses the concepts of marketing the organization to its various clients/customers and donor/subsidy providers.

This book's strength is its emphasis on objectives, rather than processes, and the heuristics for analyzing nonprofits' "markets." For those nonprofits that are genuinely drifting, this book would be invaluable.

Its weakness is its neglect of the possibility of disagreement. The author exhorts us to make decisions about what results we intend to accomplish, but never mentions what to do if there is a difference of opinion. He groups the executive director and board together as "executive management" and states that good relationships among them are important; certainly they are, but how do we build these relationships? It is noted that nonprofit boards have not always been as proactive in the governance of their organizations as they should have been, but there is no discussion of why this is the case, or what can be done to change their behavior. The book wasn't able to help this board member with the stickier problems her nonprofit board faces, nor did it provide any new insights or knowledge for the academic.

The book is very "technical"—it reads like a manual, with an abundance of acronyms, and an absence of lively examples that can help illustrate abstract concepts or keep the reader's attention. If your nonprofit organization has the problem this book was designed to fix—a vague mission with no clear understanding of who your clients or donors are and what they want from your organization—this book is for you. It provides guidelines that can be used, step-by-step, to assist you to articulate a mission for your organization. If you suffer from conflicting demands, or want to increase your understanding of nonprofit governance, it will disappoint.

Jone L. Pearce
Graduate School of Management,
University of California, Irvine