

An Introduction to the Cumberland & District Historical Society
and the Cumberland Museum and Archives
with regard to policy governance and contextually related issues.

The Cumberland and District Historical Society (CDHS) was mandated by the Village of Cumberland in the late 70s or early 80s to manage and operate the Cumberland Museum and Archives (CMA).

In its early years the CDHS Board was composed of elected volunteers who not only governed the CMA but engaged in museum operations too. Although the CDHS Board is still composed of elected volunteers, eventually the need arose to hire professional staff. Engaging staff created challenges for the Board. For instance, as the employer, the Board needed to direct employees yet not interfere with them as they go about their daily work. It's important that employees be allowed to do the work they were hired to do while still being accountable to the Board. The Board does that through the intermediary of the Executive Director (ED), who, for all intents and purposes, is the sole employee of the Board and is charged with the operations of the CMA. However, to be clear, the Board delegates to the ED authority and responsibility for the operations of the CMA without giving up its legislated responsibility for the management of the organization. That means that the Board cannot relinquish its ultimate responsibility for the organization and must act as a proper employer within the law and established ethical standards.

In 2016 the Board of the CDHS (the Board) indicated its intention of becoming a Policy Governance board but it was only in 2019 that the Board passed a motion at a regular meeting to formally declare itself a Policy Governance board. What does that mean?

All boards of businesses, educational organizations, non-profit organizations and others, are charged by the Province of British Columbia with the governance of their respective organizations. Some non-profits such as colleges, universities, hospitals, schools, etcetera, are very large with hundreds of staff and hefty budgets. Some are so small that they don't have staff and board members (often the founders of the organization) do all the work of the organization including creating governance and organizational policies while simultaneously accepting the tasks of carrying out whatever tasks are necessary to fulfill the mandate or mission of the organization including greeting visitors, dusting the shelves, doing bookkeeping and looking after the collection. A 'working board' is precisely that, a board that does the work of governance and carries out itself the work of the organization. If the CMA board were a working board, it would probably not have staff and the board members would not only decide on policy but carry out those policies in the daily operations of the museum and archives. It could also be that within a working board model, board members could be individually assigned to supervise staff in various parts of CMA operations. That is not the model the CMA Board endorses.

The CMA board, as all other boards, is by legislation responsible for all aspects of organizational functioning. Division 3, section 52 of the BC Societies Act states: “Subject to this Act, the regulations and the bylaws, the directors of a society must manage, or supervise the management of, the activities and internal affairs of the society.”

Since the board is responsible for the management of the organization, and the supervision of management, how does it do that without getting involved directly in operations? How does a board direct its employees in fulfilling the mandate and mission of the organization? No individual board member can direct staff. The Board can only do so collectively.

In the case of the CMA, the Board hires an ED to carry out its mandate and mission using whatever means they choose as long as those means are legal and ethically sound. That includes hiring appropriate staff and putting together necessary policies and procedures to achieve the Board’s goals. The Board is not interested in doing the ED’s work, nor in interfering in CMA operations although it always reserves its legislated authority to do so in certain circumstances.

The Board’s responsibility is to create the policy framework that directs staff and it has the responsibility to monitor the ED to ensure that the ED is doing the job they were hired to do. That monitoring process should be carried out in the least invasive way possible with a regular time frame and clear expectations. The CMA Board must determine the monitoring schedule and the means by which monitoring takes place.

So, how does the Board direct the ED in the least prescriptive way possible and in a way that ensures Board decisions are truly collective decisions? The only way to do so effectively and transparently is through policy.

[A note on the nature of policy: all organizations have policies although sometimes they aren’t written down or are not consistent or clear]. For instance, in dealing with visitors, an art gallery may not have a written policy, but staff do follow a set of ‘rules’ or ‘suggestions’ that may be implicit or unspoken but are nevertheless followed (more or less). Policies are essentially values and perspectives, not hard and fast rules set in concrete. Policies are guides that should be followed but only until they don’t work anymore. At that point they need to be revised or rejected outright.]

Thus, the Board of the CMA has decided to create policies that cover its own process, Board/ED relations, ED Limitations, and Ends. Operational policies such as collections or personnel policies are the responsibility of the ED although the Board decides on what kinds of operational policies are necessary. For example, the Board requires the CMA to have a collections policy. The ED’s job is to decide on the details of such a policy and to implement the policy. All policies (governance and operational) should be written down and available to anyone who wishes to

consult them. The Board has been working on a Policy Manual, but it's a work in progress. So far, the Board has worked on policies guiding its own process, it has created some Board/ED

policies, and ED Limitations policies, but has yet to formalize its Ends policies, beginning with its mission.

The Board is also considering a DRAFT personnel policy, but it's in need of serious revision and not all of its provisions are Board business. It has to be teased apart and discussed with the ED and staff. It will not remain as it is. The Board can write overall directive policies but needs to leave to the ED the preparation and application of legal and ethical personnel policies.

In terms of ED Limitations, the Board is committed to allowing the ED maximum leeway in putting together whatever means are necessary to fulfill the CMA mandate and mission. The only limitations the Board places on the ED is that whatever actions are taken are legal and ethical. On the other hand, the ED must be prepared to have their actions monitored by the Board, their employer, to ensure compliance. As noted above, this process should not be the Board's primary interest. The primary role of the Board is to create policy. According to Policy Governance™, the Board does not do, the Board talks. The doing is the staff's responsibility although Board members, as individuals, can assist staff at events or in other ways, but not as Board members and never in a way that directs staff. That would be encroaching on the ED's authority and responsibility. The Board, in no way, intends to limit the creative power of the ED or of any other staff by imposing restrictive policies. However, the Board is the ED's employer and the ED reports to the Board. The staff hired by the ED report to the ED and not to the Board unless there are exceptional circumstances.

The Board, in implementing a Policy Governance model, follows a model endorsed by the BC Museums Association. Please see the [Best Practices](#) document from the BCMA. (Once you're connected to the document, click on Governance.) One of the resources the BCMA recommends is a book called **Boards That Make A Difference** by John Carver ([website](#)). The BCMA document clearly outlines the differences between policy, working, management, and advisory boards. It's clear that the CDHS board is a Policy Governance board according to the BCMA's definitions.

On a final note, a Policy Governance board is an all or nothing affair. It's tempting to keep alive certain practices that were common in earlier times, but Policy Governance requires that all governance and operational practices be policy based and that the Board/ED linkages be clear and transparent with defined responsibilities. Reading the BCMA, CDHS and CMA documents certainly reinforces those values. Of course, there is always a transitional period, but the goal is to get policy written and implemented as soon as possible once the decision is made to become a Policy Governance board. That requires a commitment from the Board, the ED and the staff.