

Implementing Strategic Change at the Charlotte Regional Partnership

By Ronnie Bryant, CECD, FM, and Doug Eadie

MAKING POWERFUL USE OF A GOVERNANCE TASK FORCE

This article **describes how** the Charlotte Regional Partnership **successfully employed** a Governance and Bylaws Task Force consisting of Board members and the CEO to fashion – and secure Board of Directors' approval of – **a set of recommendations aimed at updating** the Partnership's governing structure and processes. The key factors that determined the success of the Task Force effort are identified, and special attention is paid to the composition of the Task Force, the "design guidelines" that provided a framework for developing the Task Force Action Report to the Board, the governance issues that the Task Force identified and that the Action Report addresses, and the roles that the CEO and Task Force consultant played in the process.

The article also describes the organization of the Governance and Bylaws Task Force Action Report and the process that was followed in presenting it to the Board.

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implementing strategic

CHANGE AT THE CHARLOTTE REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP

By Ronnie Bryant, CEcD, FM, and Doug Eadie

THE LONELY CHANGE ROAD

Significant, systematic, well-planned change is the exception to the rule in human affairs, primarily because of very understandable resistance to changing in important ways. The odds are so heavily against it that you will not meet many fellow travelers on the change road. This widespread resistance to change has to do not only with the desire to avoid extreme discomfort and with fear of failing at doing something new, but also with the very common ego attachment to the way things are. This often creates counter-productive nostalgia that exhibits itself as inertia that can slow or kill change. Resistance is sometimes based on indifference, rather than on attachment to current structure and practices: the “Why does it matter?/Who cares?” syndrome. Nowhere is the change road rockier than in the area of governance. Witness the fact that so many nonprofit boards are content to inherit the board of the past in terms of role, structure, and processes, rather than tackling serious governance reform.

BEATING THE ODDS: THE CRP STORY

The Charlotte Regional Partnership (CRP) is a nonprofit economic development organization representing 16 counties in North and South Carolina that brings together governments and local businesses to market the Charlotte region nationally and internationally as a premier business destina-



tion. Founded in 1992, CRP – with a \$3.8 million budget and 17 employees – spearheads national and international “missions” to promote the advantages of the Charlotte region to business leaders, conducts research on collaboration within the region, and fosters regional cooperation in the economic development sphere.

At its January 2006 meeting, the CRP Board of Directors unanimously accepted the Action Report of its Governance and Bylaws Task Force, putting in place a comprehensive re-design of CRP governance. This was the culmination of an intensive four-month developmental process that the Governance and Bylaws Task Force had spearheaded. The ambitious and far-reaching “High-Impact Governing Program” that was launched in January 2006 included such steps as:

- Adopting a “Board Governing Mission” setting out the key governing responsibilities of the Board.
- Putting in place a dual governance structure consisting of a Board of Directors to provide

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strategic oversight and an Executive Governing Board to do detailed governing work.

- Providing the Executive Governing Board with standing committees corresponding to broad governing functions to assist it in carrying out its responsibilities.
- Establishing a set of standing committee guidelines and revising the CRP Bylaws to legitimize the new governance structure.

The key components of the CRP High-Impact Governing Program have been successfully implemented. The Bylaws have been revised. The Executive Governing Board has been established, along with its standing committees, which are functioning in accordance with the guidelines that were adopted. CRP could never have accomplished such far-reaching governance change in such a short time by taking the traditional path: merely having a consultant come up with recommendations for change and then attempting to sell Board members on their merits. Attempts to drive change from outside are notoriously ineffective, in our experience, quickly succumbing to resistance from board members and executives who feel only scant ownership of the proposed changes.

Instead, rather than relying on the high-risk, outsider-driven approach, CRP employed the Governance and Bylaws Task Force, which consisted of 19 Board members and the CRP president/CEO, as the vehicle for coming up with the recommended changes in the CRP governance system. We believe that the CRP experience in using its Governance and Bylaws Task Force as a change vehicle can provide the reader with a model that, with appropriate tailoring, can be applied in any economic development organization in both designing a change program and ensuring its implementation, overcoming the odds that make traveling the change road such a lonely experience.

OVERVIEW OF THE TASK FORCE EFFORT

It did not take long for the newly appointed CRP president & CEO, who arrived on the scene in August 2005, to conclude that governance reform had to make his list of top CEO priorities during his first year on the job. In-depth interviews with all of the Board's officers and many of its other members, discussions with a number of community leaders outside the CRP Board, and review of Board meeting minutes indicated a number of problems. Chief among the governance issues were that fewer than half of the 90-some members of the Board attended the monthly Board meeting, which had become a "show and tell" exercise involving virtually no decision-making; the Executive Committee was acting as the real, behind-the-scenes governing body; and the Board was not systematically involved in providing strategic direction for the CRP. This was a call to action for the CEO, who realized that his long-term success depended on partnering with a truly high-impact governing Board.

Fortunately, the CRP Board chair and members of the Executive Committee agreed, and on September 13, 2005, the Board chair appointed the members of the

Governance and Bylaws Task Force, charging them to "generate an Action Report . . . consisting of detailed, practical recommendations for strengthening the Board's governing role, structure, and processes." Key milestones in the process of developing the Task Force Action Report included:

1. Selection of a consultant to serve as "Governance Counsel" to the Task Force, in this capacity conducting research on CRP governance practices, drafting sections of the Action Report for Task Force review, and facilitating Task Force work sessions.
2. Governance Counsel's interviews with Task Force members and his review of pertinent CRP governance documentation, such as the Bylaws and Board meeting minutes.



3. A half-day Task Force work session in October, at which two key sections of the Action Report were reviewed: the design guidelines to guide the Task Force's work and the governance issues that the Task Force recommendations were intended to address.
4. Another half-day Task Force work session in November, at which revised versions of the design guidelines and governance issues were reviewed and detailed action recommendations discussed.
5. Task Force teleconference in December, at which the revised action recommendations were reviewed and fine-tuned.
6. A joint meeting of the Task Force and the Board's Executive Committee later in December, at which the complete Action Report was reviewed and finalized and a strategy for presenting the Action Report to the Board was fashioned.

There's no question that the Governance and Bylaws Task Force was an effective strategic change vehicle: highly complex, high-stakes governance changes whose impact will be felt for years to come were actually implemented. Attempting to achieve this level of change through the business-as-usual operational planning process would have been a dead-end road. Five primary factors on which we will focus in the remainder of this article accounted for the success of the Governance and Bylaws Task Force as a governance change vehicle:

1. Careful construction of the Task Force in terms of its composition;
2. The development of a framework within which the Task Force could fashion its action recommendations, consisting of clear, detailed “Design Guidelines” that the Task Force could follow and a set of governance issues on which the Task Force could focus;
3. Strong, visible, hands-on CEO leadership throughout the Task Force effort;
4. The assistance of an outside consultant (“Governance Counsel”) with substantial change management and governance experience; and
5. Close attention to communication and “sales” where the Board was concerned.

TASK FORCE COMPOSITION

In the context of a generally disengaged Board of 90-some members, many of whom never attended Board meetings, the challenge facing the new Governance and Bylaws Task Force wouldn't be to overcome resistance. Rather, capturing the attention of Board members – getting them really interested in governance improvement – was the challenge, and in this regard getting the right people to serve on the Task Force was highly important, starting with the Task Force chair. Fortunately, the Board chair and CEO recruited a real heavy-hitter as Task Force chair who would give the Task Force effort instant credibility: the immediate past chair of the Board, who was widely respected and admired for his unselfish service to CRP over the years.

With the right chair in place, it was relatively easy to attract a high-level, widely representative group of 19 volunteers to serve on the Task Force. In assembling the group, the Board chair, CEO, and newly recruited Task Force chair agreed that diversity of membership – in terms of gender, affiliation (business and government), and geography – would be critical to the Task Force's ultimate success. They also employed a profile of desirable attributes and qualifications in recruiting Task Force members, including traits such as:

- A history of active, productive involvement in CRP governance,
- The ability and willingness to commit substantial time to Task Force deliberations (involvement in name only was clearly not an option),
- Demonstrated open-mindedness (not obviously wedded to particular governance approaches, such as being anti-committee),
- A team player (but not namby-pamby about expressing viewpoints), and
- The professional respect of colleagues.

That the Task Force was able to work through a number of very complex governance issues in only four months and that the deliberations were always highly substantive while invariably civil is testimony to the fact that the right people were recruited. In our experience,

THE TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

The CRP Governance and Bylaws Task Force Action Report recommended nine Action Steps in three phases:

- I. Adopt a “High-Impact Governing” resolution to legitimize the Action Steps to follow.
- II. Adopt a two-tier governance structure consisting of the Board of Directors and the Executive Governing Board.
- III. Adopt the “Board Governing Mission,” describing the major governing functions of the recommended Executive Governing Board.
- IV. Create a structure of five standing committees of the Executive Governing Board.
- V. Establish a High-Impact Governing Program to serve as a temporary framework for managing implementation of the Action Report.
- VI. Make necessary revisions in the CRP Bylaws as necessary to carry out the Recommendations in the Action Report.
- VII. Build the Executive Governing Board's self-management capacity.
- VIII. Take steps to ensure a strong, productive Board-CEO working partnership.
- IX. Systematize the Board's ongoing role in CRP strategic planning.

it could easily have taken six to eight months, in light of the complexity and stakes involved in the effort.

A GUIDING FRAMEWORK

At the get-go, the Task Force chair, CEO, and consultant retained to serve as “Governance Counsel” to the Task Force agreed that the Task Force process should be designed to guard against two very common pathologies that have bedeviled many strategic change initiatives in both the public and business sectors:

1. Taking a “sky's the limit” approach - charging ahead in exploring possible governance improvements without any boundaries to constrain the examination of change possibilities, which could easily lead to rambling, frustrating Task Force meetings.
2. Jumping into detailed “problem-solving” without front-end agreement on the major governance issues to be addressed, which could lead to the premature selection of pet solutions that are passionately promoted by one or another Task Force member.

With these potential dangers in mind, the Task Force chair, CEO, and Governance Counsel agreed that early in the process the Task Force should reach agreement on a framework within which its deliberations would take place, consisting of: a set of “design guidelines” and a detailed description of the governance issues on which the Task Force should focus.

The design guidelines, which consisted of critical definitions, principles, and assumptions, were intended to provide a framework for the Task Force in carrying out its charge. By making the guidelines crystal clear at the very beginning – well before any action recommendations were under consideration – the Task Force

undoubtedly saved quite a bit of time that might otherwise have been wasted in debating possible change options as the process moved forward. The Task Force Action Report that was ultimately presented to the CRP Board set forth seven preeminent guidelines:

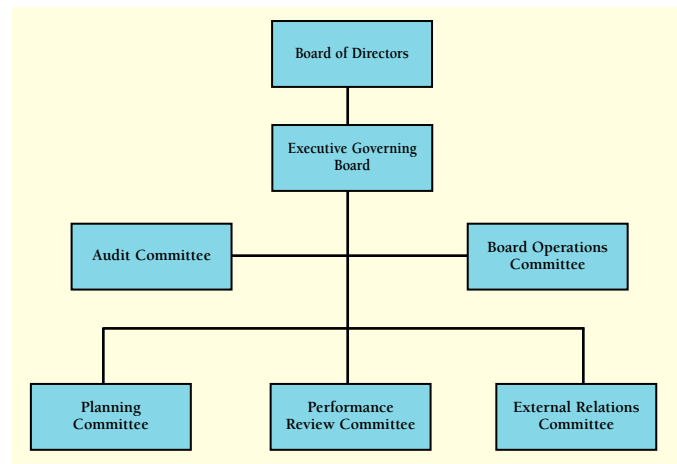
1. The Action Recommendations of the Governance and Bylaws Task Force are aimed at ensuring high-impact governance of the CRP, but stronger governance is not an end in itself. Rather, the preeminent reason for strengthening CRP governance is to ensure that CRP can more fully translate its vision and mission into actual practice in the Charlotte region.
2. High-impact governing work essentially consists of continuously answering three critical organizational questions:
 - In what directions should CRP head – and what should it become – over the long run (the strategic planning question)?
 - What should CRP be now and over the coming year (the mission and budget questions)?
 - How is CRP performing: programmatically, financially, and administratively (the accountability question)?

These fundamental questions are answered by a governing body making judgments and decisions that flow along three broad lines: (1) strategic and operational planning/budget development; (2) performance oversight and monitoring; (3) external relations.

3. There are four sure signs that high-impact governing work is being done:
 - The critical strategic and policy-level decisions required to ensure CRP's long-term vitality and success are being made in a full and timely fashion.
 - The CRP Board is fully deployed as a precious resource, and CRP is capitalizing on the diverse experience, expertise, knowledge, and perspectives of Board members.
 - CRP Board members are creatively and proactively engaged in making strategic and policy-level decisions, rather than merely reacting to finished staff work.
 - CRP Board members are actively involved in monitoring the CRP's performance and in maintaining solid working relationships with key external stakeholders in the Charlotte region.
4. The Task Force Action Recommendations are intended to be practical, relatively easy to implement over the course of six months without disrupting CRP operations, and affordable in the sense of not requiring an extraordinary commitment of either time or money.
5. The Task Force Action Recommendations capitalize on recent advances in the rapidly changing field of nonprofit governance, rather than reinventing the proverbial wheel.
6. The Action Recommendations build on the strong foundation that has been built since the CRP's founding, in terms of:

- The execution of well-crafted programs that have fostered both regional economic development and public-private collaboration,
 - A history of Board member dedication to the CRP mission, and
 - A strong Board commitment to high-impact governance and receptivity to the changes that might be involved in strengthening CRP governance.
7. A close, productive, enduring Board-CEO partnership is at the heart of CRP success and must, therefore, be addressed in the Task Force Action Report.

The Governance and Bylaws Task Force spent twice as much time discussing the governance issues as it did the design guidelines, not only because the issues would lead directly to the action recommendations, but also because they were politically more sensitive. The challenge was to



Recommended new CRP standing committee structure.

pinpoint the truly important issues deserving serious Task Force attention without appearing to draw up an indictment of the Board of Directors or to impugn CRP's credibility. On the one hand, to sugar coat the problems would risk failing to make a compelling case for change; on the other, to be hyper-critical would risk offending Board members whose support was critical.

In its introduction to the description of governance issues, the Task Force pointed out that "CRP governance is far from broken. Indeed, this precious regional asset has made a substantial contribution to the Greater Charlotte economy since its founding, in large measure as the result of Board-CEO collaboration in providing oversight and direction to the large and complex enterprise that is CRP. Therefore, this Action Report is about fine-tuning governing role, structure, and processes, rather than radically reforming CRP governance, in order to ensure even higher-impact governance in a rapidly changing, always challenging world." Then the Task Force identified six important issues that made the case for change:

1. The CRP Board of Directors is not realizing its tremendous leadership potential as CRP's governing body and is, consequently, being underutilized as a precious regional resource, despite its high-level composition, which is highly representative of the business and public sectors in the regional economy.

2. The Board's falling short of its governing potential is clearly not the result of either inadequate Board composition or lack of Director commitment. Rather, the primary reason is the Board's under-development as a governing body, most significantly:
 - The Board's governing role and work are not clearly defined.
 - The Board is under-developed structurally. The absence of well-designed standing committees – with the exception of the Executive Committee – that can serve as “governing engines” to support Board deliberations is a serious impediment to the Board's realizing its governing potential in practice.
3. Key governing processes need to be updated to ensure creative, proactive Board involvement in making critical decisions, most notably: strategic and operational planning/budget development; monitoring programmatic and financial performance; and image building/external relations.
4. Board meetings are largely occasions for briefing Board members on CRP progress and for social interaction, providing virtually no opportunity for serious involvement in making critical governing decisions.
5. The Board's size works against active involvement in CRP governance, especially in the absence of well-designed standing committees.
6. The Board-CEO partnership needs to be more systematically managed to ensure that this precious but always fragile working relationship remains close, productive, and enduring.

HANDS-ON CEO LEADERSHIP OF THE PROCESS

The strong support and active participation of CRP's new Chief Executive Officer were critical to the success of the Governance and Bylaws Task Force as a change vehicle. The new CRP CEO viewed the Board as a precious asset to be fully deployed in the interest of carrying out the CRP mission and took responsibility for being the “Chief Board Developer,” in this capacity making sure that the Task Force was successful in fulfilling its charge. In playing the “Chief Board Developer” role, the CEO:

- Collaborated with the Board chair in finding the right person to head the Task Force.
- Identified an external consultant with the requisite knowledge, skills, and experience to serve as “Governance Counsel” to the Task Force.
- Worked closely with the Task Force chair and Governance Counsel before the group was even assembled to make sure that the methodology and gameplan the Task Force would follow made sense both technically and politically.
- Named a top executive to serve as “Chief Staff” to the Task Force and day-to-day liaison with the external consultant and providing her with hands-on guidance throughout the initiative.
- Exercised rigorous quality control, carefully reviewing the materials that Governance Counsel developed and directly needed revision before transmitting them to

the Task Force, including meeting agendas and drafts of sections of the Task Force Action Report.

GOVERNANCE COUNSEL

The CEO and Task Force chair realized that it made good sense to retain the services of an outside consultant to assist the Task Force in carrying out its demanding charge for three primary reasons. First, having an objective, disinterested facilitator without a stake in the outcomes would certainly help move the process forward, keeping it from becoming any more political than necessary. Second, a governance expert would be able to bring in best practice information from the wider world. And, third, having someone prepare materials for Task Force meetings would not only expedite the deliberations, but would also take pressure off an already extremely busy executive team.

They agreed that the person who would serve as Governance Counsel must bring to the job a combination of:

- In-depth experience with a wide range of association and local economic development clients in two areas: implementing strategic change initiatives and governance improvement,
- Strong facilitation skills as demonstrated by successful engagements with similar task forces,
- “Thought leader” status in the fields of governance and economic development as demonstrated by published books and articles and by speaking engagements, and
- In the realm of style – enough presence to lead a group of Task Force members through a very demanding process.

By the end of December 2005, the Task Force had basically completed its technical work. The Action Report had gone through two drafts, was reviewed with the Board's Executive Committee, and fine-tuned for transmittal to the Board. The Task Force could now turn its attention to communication and “sales.”

COMMUNICATION AND SALES

By the end of December 2005, the Task Force had basically completed its technical work. The Action Report had gone through two drafts, was reviewed with the Board's Executive Committee, and fine-tuned for transmittal to the Board. The Task Force could now turn its attention to communication and “sales.” By the turn of the year, a two-part strategy aimed at securing Board approval of the Task Force recommendations was in place: (1) transmitting a comprehensive, easy-to-understand Action Report to the Board well in advance of its January meeting and (2) presenting and explaining the key recommendations at the January Board meeting.

No document as complex and far-reaching as the Governance and Bylaws Task Force Action Report to the


Board could be expected to speak for itself entirely, but the Task Force made sure that its Action Report came as close to being self-explanatory as possible. In addition to breaking up the text with headings and sub-headings and employing a numbering system for action recommendations, the 42-page Action Report was organized in a logical fashion that facilitated understanding, starting at a general level and becoming more detailed in later sections. The Action Report consisted of six major sections:

1. Executive Summary – summarizing the action recommendations,
2. Preface – describing the developmental process that the Task Force employed in preparing its Action Report to the Board,
3. Design Assumptions and Guidelines – explaining the key definitions, principles, and assumptions that provided boundaries for the Task Force in fashioning action recommendations,
4. Governance Issues – describing the governance gaps and problems that the action recommendations were intended to address,
5. Action steps – setting forth the recommended actions in three phases covering a period of six months, and
6. Exhibits – providing important backup detail, such as detailed functional descriptions of the recommended new standing committees and a committee organizational chart.

Even though its Action Report was designed to speak for itself to the extent feasible, the Governance and Bylaws Task Force recognized that presentation of the Action

Report at the January Board meeting would be a critical step in securing Board approval. Therefore, a detailed PowerPoint presentation covering the key points in the Action Report was developed and carefully reviewed by the Task Force and the designated presenters – the Task Force chair and CEO – thoroughly rehearsed the presentation before the Board meeting. At the Board meeting, Task Force members joined the presenters at the front of the room and actively participated in explaining the rationale and technical content of the recommendations and in responding to Board members' questions.

A TESTED CHANGE VEHICLE

The Board's unanimous acceptance of the Task Force recommendations at the January 2006 meeting and the subsequent translation of the Task Force Action Report into actual practice certainly appear to validate the work of the Governance and Bylaws Task Force. Feedback since the January Board meeting indicates that the Task Force really did make a significant difference, especially in legitimizing the recommendations, although it is not possible to scientifically prove that conclusion. It's quite possible that the same results might have eventually been achieved without the Task Force, but it would very likely have taken much longer and the change journey would almost certainly have been more painful. So the reader who is contemplating tackling change of the magnitude of CRP's governance reforms should at the very least seriously consider employing a board task force as a very practical mechanism for overcoming the many obstacles likely to be encountered on the change road. 



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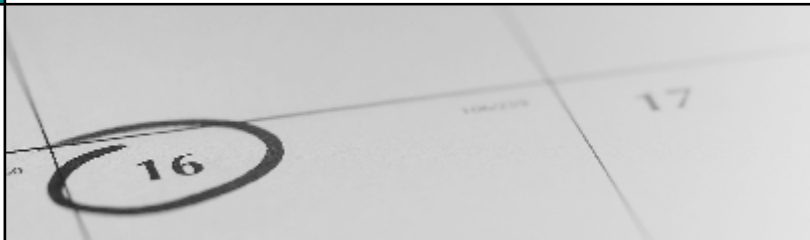
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