

EXPERIMENTS IN UN-GOVERNING

Principles & practices for building collective agency





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INTRODUCTION

5,127. That's the number of prototypes James Dyson built before he perfected his eponymous bagless vacuum. Now worth \$9.3 billion dollars, Dyson's ascent from designer to mass manufacturer can be seen as an archetypal hero's journey, exemplifying the expected innovation trajectory — from problem to concept to prototype to mass market. Social innovation ascribes to this same narrative of success. Investment in social research & development pays off when a tried & tested solution attracts sustainable resource and scales.

5,790+. That's (roughly) the number of interactions our team has prototyped over the past eight years as we've co-developed two new models of social support, Curiko and Soloss. Both models are tried and tested. Only to attract resource, to accept money, to sign contracts, to negotiate insurance, to manage risk, really, to be legitimate, these models are expected to evolve into organizational structures with clear lines of authority and governance. But, what if these organizing conventions and governance structures pose an existential risk to the fidelity and integrity of innovative models? So much of our research & development process is about breaking free from bureaucratic boxes to question fundamental assumptions and imagine alternative operating systems. Is success really stuffing the alternative system back into the very boxes we sprung out of?

We don't think so. But, where to? How might we move promising prototypes forward in non-institutional and non-industrial ways? How do we not inadvertently kill what's special about an innovative model, while also

loosening our grip, and opening up opportunities for community members to feel ownership and have real influence over a collective creation? Is it possible to unbound decision-making from some of the stagnant ideas about rationality, professionalism, and risk underpinning conventional governance?¹

When the InWithForward team and its partners, Degrees of Change Design and the City of Edmonton's RECOVER team, set out to find alternative governing structures, we had optimism that dynamism could prevail. We considered ourselves adept at circumventing institutional norms and finding path-breaking inspiration. We were motivated by a desire to unleash the spirit and practice of two mature prototypes. Our vision was that they would find a broad-based set of owner-stakeholders and that power over them would never become concentrated in just a few people's hands. Instead, we wanted to construct systems of meaningful participation and transparency that would distribute power amongst their many co-creators. In the design process we had tried to maximize participants' ability to shape the prototype, often in operational ways. How could we extend that pattern of influence to larger, more strategic decisions about the present and future direction of each model?

Governance

a dynamic choreography where people make decisions on how to live, work and create together *and* a set of laws, liabilities, cultural narratives, rigid structures, procedures, and roles.

¹ "Governance," Institute of Governance, accessed Sept 25, 2023, <https://iog.ca/what-is-governance/>



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Despite our optimism, progress has been slow. Most examples we found and people we spoke to were working to make traditional boards better. Few had our kind of governors in mind: people who had not only been marginalized from decision-making tables, but from decision-making more generally, even in their personal lives. We were finding little to help us understand the developmental path to seeing oneself as a motivated and capable co-governor. Systems of accountability to funders took centre stage while mechanisms for accountability to community felt under-developed.

More importantly, perhaps, so many of the fundamental logics of dominant approaches to governance seemed to go undisrupted. The prevailing set of laws, liabilities, cultural narratives, rigid structures, procedures, and roles grew out of particular values, beliefs, and logics. We were suspicious of

those values, beliefs, and logics because the resulting structures and practices seemed so often to be both elitist and reductive of our full humanity.

As we started to excavate these ideas, we saw how so many attempts at more liberatory and democratic approaches had failed to take root. We re-graded our pursuit from finding fresh inspiration to disrupting governance. A year later, we were planning two retreats for many adult invitees who had never been to a retreat. The most important item on the packing list? Puppets and a chocolate fountain at one, Dolly Parton tunes and a tickle trunk at the other. We were beginning to test some ideas, with little assurance of where they might lead. **This is the story of our journey to test a different basis for governance: one where to be a governor is not based on status, productivity, or the ability to make a persuasive argument, but rather on our shared desire to be in deep relationship and co-create community.**





THE CHALLENGE & OPPORTUNITY COMES INTO VIEW

May 11th, 2023

We are gathered on zoom in a virtual Curiko experience. "We" are Laurie, Paul, Grace, and me, Nina. Laurie and Paul are Curiko members. Both have a disability. Grace is our user experience design fellow. And there's me, Nina, InWithForward's Social Theorist. I am hosting the gathering. We have set-up a digital whiteboard to guide the conversation.

"What was the last decision you made?," I pose to the group.

Silence. More silence.

"Paul, what's the last decision you remember making?," I try again.

"I've never really made a decision."

Paul's response is as simple as it is striking.

"You said you are going on a trip to visit your family members soon. Who made the decision about who will be taking care of your cat when you are gone?" (Cats are a big theme that night.)

"My sister did."

I rephrase the question a few more times, trying different angles, probing for moments of autonomy. The response pattern remained the same.

"Who is a decision-maker?," I wonder aloud.

"My family, my parents, my worker, my doctor, ..." Not Paul.

"Would you like to make more decisions in your life?," I inquire.

"I'm not sure."

I turn to Laurie. "Laurie, what was the last decision you made?," I ask.

"The last decision I made was to come here."

I exhale. It took several email exchanges of reassurance and clarification from me before Laurie decided to join the night's gathering. I cling to the hook.

"Why did you hesitate to make the decision to join tonight?"

"I wasn't sure if I had anything to contribute."

"And now, looking back, do you feel like you were able to contribute something?"

"Yes."

What is Curiko?

A platform bringing together people, whose bodies & brains work beautifully differently, for in-person, online, and box experiences designed to spark more moments of connection & contribution.

Prototyped since 2015.²

² "100s of Splendid Experiences," Curiko, accessed July 20, 2023, <https://www.curiko.ca/about/>.



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“I wouldn’t want to be on a board. It’s boring.”

A year earlier. May 2022. Breka Bakery.

When we first ventured out on our governance exploration journey, we connected with some of our Curiko community members to get a sense of their desire to be part of Curiko’s new governance model. The feedback we got was clear across all conversations:

“Would you be interested in becoming a board member for Curiko?”

“I don’t know. That sounds boring.” (Brody, Curiko member)

Besides not showing any immediate desire to be part of a governance board, Brody also wasn’t sure if he’d be the right person for the job, especially decisions about budgets and money. *“Maybe my father could help. He’s an accountant.”*

Brody’s hesitation raises important questions: What are the skills needed to be part of a governance board? Is professional expertise the marker that should determine who gets to make decisions and who does not? And, more importantly, how can we create the possibility for folks to envision themselves in positions of power if that has never been part of their lived experience?

To have a better understanding of the current realities of our Curiko members, we explored where in their lives they experience the greatest sense of agency and power.

Kat is a dedicated moderator at Curiko. She brings joy and a cheeky sense of humour to all experiences. She calls herself a “troublemaker” and doesn’t hesitate to speak her mind or say “NO” when something doesn’t sit right with her. Kat identifies the grocery store as

the place where she has the most control: “I can buy cookies if I want.” The other place she can think of is the doctor’s office. Over the past two years, Kat has been in charge of taking notes about her episodes and now takes on the role of the expert when it comes to her health. At the doctor’s office, she is the one leading the conversation and feels confident about knowing what to say.

Angel has been a community member for quite some time and has taken on almost every role at Curiko. She shares a similar story about her experience executing decision-making power: *“Power is when I get to pick my food at the grocery store.”*

Lindsay does not like to waste time. A quick catch up and we dive right into the conversation. A conversation that comes with a lot of long silences and ‘I don’t knows’ that are difficult to make sense of and uncomfortable to sit through. Lindsay experiences a sense of power in her role as a sister because it allows her to shape conversations. This is an unexpected insight. What conditions and relationships would enable Lindsay to feel like she is shaping conversations?

Kat is interested in strategic decision-making and setting goals for Curiko, but would not want to be part of a governance board. Why?

“It sounds boring to sit through long meetings.”

“What do you think would make it more fun?” we ask.

“Maybe we could show up in our pajamas, have lots of treats, and not call them ‘meetings?!’”

We think Kat is onto something.



“Maybe we could show up in our pajamas, have lots of treats, and not call them ‘meetings?!’”



Dec 8, 2022. A Pre-Holiday Season Decision.

We are not in our pajamas per Kat's suggestion, but close -- we're adorned in table cloths, fairy lights, wrapping paper, really whatever we can find. It's a few weeks before the holidays, and a group of Losstenders are riffing on Seinfeld's infamous "Festivus," spontaneously co-creating a new holiday ritual. The end date for the second prototype of a community care network for grief & loss, called Soloss, has come and gone.

Soloss is premised on a new role called the Losstender. Losstenders are everyday folks with their own creative healing practices who, in this round of prototyping, are learning how to hold space for frontline social service workers' experience of grief and loss. However, social service workers have been so busy opening-up winter warming shelters for the houseless community that they scarcely imagined making time for themselves. As a result, several Losstenders have struggled to get traction and engage with the frontline workers with whom they have been paired. We've come together to

debrief, share how we're feeling about the experience so far, and decide what to do.

Most Losstenders say they want to continue. They describe feeling under-utilized after doing so much learning to prepare for their unconventional roles. Together, the group makes a decision that Losstending will continue for another two months. They recognize there is no money to top up honoraria, but they perceive there to be plenty of value. We have been talking about freely given, non-institutional relationships. Here is an opportunity to practice that big idea. The group takes it up.

- **Decision-making method:** Deliberation & consensus
- **Result:** Consensus reached to extend the prototype by two months without the addition of more resources
- **Decision-makers:** Losstenders (community members testing a new role)

³ "About - Soloss: The Network," Soloss, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.soloss.ca/about>.

What is Soloss?

A network of artists, musicians, dancers, storytellers, breathwork practitioners (and other creative folks) holding space for fellow community members' experiences of grief & loss. Prototyped since 2020.³



NAMING CHALLENGES

InWithForward's work, at its core, is concerned with agency and a redistribution of power and possibility in the realization of social supports. Our mission statement is to turn social safety nets into trampolines that allow people to bounce up and move in directions that they themselves value. We work with people marginalized by systems to understand their contexts, values, beliefs, and desired outcomes. Together, we design and test alternative supports to close the gap between 'what is' and 'what could be.' These alternative supports are rooted in a different set of values, beliefs, and logics than dominant systems. We believe means and ends ought to align: if we value people's sense of agency and autonomy, then we should co-produce supports that build up, respect, and reinforce people's exercise of choice, and only the conscious delegation of decision-making to others. We must avoid undermining agency and autonomy wherever possible. That's why our prototypes seek to bring ground-up values to life in every interaction, end-to-end. The challenge comes once we find promising interactions. How do we operationalize what is working without defaulting to institutionalizing structures that undermine agency and autonomy?

At the start of our odyssey to find values-aligned governance structures, we defined our problems with governance in these terms:

- ① Legally mandated governance boards for non-profits perpetuate the power dynamics of dominant systems in their structure and best practices. They can limit the potential of fledgling social innovations that are trying to challenge centralized power structures and conceptions of risk.
 - a) Too often we see people become stuck in systems that reduce agency, presume values, and see those who are in need of support as having little contribution to make. Users of services are often treated as needy and dependent while those who make big decisions are benevolent experts and professionals volunteering their time. That binary is naturalized by arguments about the competencies needed to make governance decisions.
- ② Governance structures ostensibly exist to maintain organizational accountability and pursue purpose. However:
 - a) We increasingly see such structures are accountable to organizations' self interests (survival), spending far more time on risk mitigation and financial governance rather than core values and principles;





- b) Governance boards tend to standardize practices through top-down policies and procedures that limit the opportunity for organizational actors to use discernment and creativity in a bottom-up fashion; and,
 - c) Marginalized people, especially those with intellectual disabilities, have representation on some governing boards, but rarely influence. The established structures of governance are neither accessible nor attractive to many people in the communities we are designing solutions with, limiting meaningful participation to tokenistic involvement.
- ③ Governance models rarely make explicit, or seek to transform the legacy of, stakeholders' historic relationship to, and experience of, power.
- a) In the case of the communities we work with, many have been exposed to abuses of power, and a great deal of paternalism, while being excluded from positional power. Naturally, these experiences shape both people's expectations and behaviour when they do hold power. Re-enacting abuses of power or intense conformity do not promote flourishing (for the actor or the acted on) and may simply reinforce others' beliefs that such people should not have power, both of which work to maintain their powerlessness.

Little about non-profit governance seems designed for the purpose of increasing the individual and collective power of those on the margins. Constitutions, by-laws, and procedural rules focus on meeting fiduciary and legal requirements, managing exposure and liabilities, and ensuring the organization lives another day. From the beginning of our journey, we have wanted to challenge the often tacit logic that technical competencies produce better decisions than aligned values, diverse perspectives, and lived experiences.

Instead, we see that certain, fairly predictable decisions are the product of such competencies: they tend to result in decisions that centre the best interests of organizations, but not necessarily their end users or communities. Often there is no attempt to distinguish the best interests of an organization from that of different stakeholders, perpetuating a troublesome narrative that they are one and the same. Board members and leaders recruited for technical and professional expertise can be more attuned to the needs of funders & donors -- these are the people more likely to be within their social networks -- rather than the needs of people using the organization's services.

So much of the structures and systems we've seen replicate the existing social order by imposing hierarchies and authority flows, which exclude people on the margins by offering unfavorable conditions for them to participate in meaningful ways.



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The challenges we keep observing in traditional, board-centric governance, play out on several scales of interaction. For individuals, we can think about how the status quo contributes to people's sense of motivation, capability, and opportunity, essential components underlying any behaviour, such as participation in governance. At the organizational level, we can consider how dominant governance practices and structures treat order & control, legitimacy, and resource management; and finally, on a broader social level, we can look at the paradigmatic approach to risk, accountability, and expertise or competence.

The chart on the next page reflects our thoughts about the challenges of governance norms on these three levels.



THREE LEVELS OF GOVERNANCE NORMS





Individual

Individual

Includes norms and expectations about motivations, opportunities and perceived capabilities which shape individuals' direct interactions with governance bodies.

Motivation

Too many marginalized folks don't want to be part of a board structure: it's boring and/or intimidating; there's too much responsibility and time commitment; and you can't be your authentic self.

At the same time, non-profits struggle to recruit for boards. Thankful there is interest, there is little time spent delving into motivations and desires. A charity mindset can easily take root in which goodwill is the only requirement.

Perceived Capability

Too many marginalized folks don't perceive they have what it takes to be part of decision-making, sometimes due to little experience of making decisions, or communicating preferences.

Those that do say yes to boards are often removed from the day-to-day contexts of the people the organization is designed to serve, with little understanding of the limits of their understanding.

Opportunity

Board membership is exclusionary: there are a limited number of board seats and few other mechanisms to meaningfully contribute. There's also little opportunity & expectation for ongoing learning. Board training tends to focus on procedure over axiology (values and how to apply them).



Organizational

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Organizational

Includes norms and expectations which shape how organizations go about fulfilling their governance functions.

Order & control

Boards are set-up to bed down practices; establish clear lines of authority; and clean-up “messes.” Anything that is emergent is messy.

Procedural focus

A good board meeting makes its way through a pre-set agenda, follows a prescribed sequence, and meets external requirements for transparency and accountability this way. This is exemplified by Robert’s Rules.

Status Oriented

Organizations gain status & access to resources based on who is on the board, their credentials, position, and proximity to money and power.

Resource – money

There are constraints in the flow of dollars. Organizations must be set up as a charity, with a board, to accept many sources of philanthropic funding and some government grants. At the same time, organization by-laws often restrict paying board members, which affects who takes part: non-professionals may have a harder time volunteering their time. Unlike corporate boards, the narrative around non-profit boards is one of voluntary contribution.

Resource – time

Board members tend to meet quarterly, though some boards meet monthly. As a volunteer role, board members may have limited time to give to informal interactions outside of structured settings. That can mean board members have limited opportunity to be in authentic relationship with people served by the organization, except in formal presentation settings, where there can be a high level of performance.



Broader Social

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Broader Social

Includes cultural values and beliefs that shape our ideas about 'good governance.'

Expertise/Rationality

'Good' decision-making is rooted within a frame of rationality and productivity. To make rational decisions requires expertise & high language proficiency.

Accountability

Tends to flow up to funders rather than down to community and end users. Through reporting requirements, financial audits, and evaluation mandates, organizational decision-makers are often needing to 'prove value' to people in positions of power, not community members who are on the receiving end of services. Expected outcomes, deliverables, and performance metrics are often set in contracts, not by people on the ground.

Risk

Defined in terms of bad things that might happen for organizational status, reputation & bottom line, rather than in terms of the consequential effect on people's engagement, sense of agency, freedom, possibility, etc.



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To summarize our discontent: current structures tend to preserve existing patterns of power and authority, reinforcing the status quo through risk aversion, hierarchical accountability, and a bias towards professional expertise. Boards are rarely developmental places with allocated time for learning: new governors are expected to arrive with most, if not all, the knowledge they need; there is an emphasis on technical skills over values and living experience. So, legal requirements aside, we were quite ready to walk away from the structure-first model. But where to?



[illegible]



SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS

Many voices are calling for a re-think on governance. We started our search for alternative governance models with some research into philosophies of decision-making and distributive justice. We reached out to the Institute for Anarchist Studies and a Mohawk professor working with her own Indigenous community near Montréal to bring traditional approaches into present-day decision-making. We are also regularly exposed to a few different ways of thinking about governance through our project partners, social sector discourse du jour, and the core social theory in which we ground our work. Here's how we've come to understand what some of these different perspectives and theories bring to discussions on governance.

EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION PERSPECTIVE:

Talk about equity, diversity, and inclusion is seemingly everywhere. Especially since the death of George Floyd and the justice-seeking movements that rose to prominence over the pandemic, most organizations we were in conversation with were making time for conversations about (J)EDI. People who identify with this movement range across a spectrum and cannot really be respectfully described as a cohesive group. The most common EDI analysis we saw operating in organizations identified the problem with governance as boards not being adequately representative of the communities they serve, which undermined trust and legitimacy. This problem of a 'too homogenous board' is often attributed to a more technical set of factors that can be solved by broadening referral channels

and considering candidates without as many years of experience. The format and structure of boards generally goes uncommented on. Often, certain kinds of diversity are seen as more desirable than others. We do not frequently hear about class diversity, and outside of disability-focused organizations, we rarely hear critical questions about what kind of abilities are needed to contribute to governance. Often, what organizations are pursuing when they take on EDI work is implicit bias training for their board members, self-assessing how they are doing on EDI measures, introducing board conversations on the importance of EDI, issuing statements of commitment, and targeting folks who would bring a particular kind of diversity to the board.

EQUITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION PERSPECTIVE

Strengths

- Perceived legitimacy
- Reputational capital
- Better representation of community

Limits

- Format and structure of boards generally uncritiqued
- Focuses on getting people to the board table, not what happens around the table or why there is a table at all





SOCIAL JUSTICE & JEDI

Others, who identify with the movement behind EDI, and who would like to add a 'J' for justice, push for a more critical approach. In its recently published report titled "[Reimagining Non-Profit Governance](#),"⁴ the Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations argues that "Efforts to foster diversity and inclusion are framed not as matters of justice and equity, which they are, but now co-opted by neoliberal values are perceived as meaningful only insofar as they contribute to corporate outcomes like organizational efficiency." By bringing a JEDI analysis together with a social justice orientation, the report questions the pervasive focus on boards, a single structure, to do all the work of governance. "Non-profits that try to populate their limited number of board positions with the diversity of experiences needed to meaningfully represent their communities – because they have no other structures for engaging those community members – can veer into tokenism."⁵

We're excited by this question of how we can think beyond traditional board governance because in our work - seeking to shift both paradigms and practices for the provision of human welfare - boards are often slow, disconnected from the daily work of the organization, and detached from the experiences of the people who interact with, or purposely avoid, their services. They are seldom diverse in terms of race, class, ability or other kinds of lived experience and they are not expected to dedicate time for deep learning, which is necessary for a paradigm shift. They are usually recruited for their professional experience

and designations, which as "Reimagining Non-Profit Governance" points out:

"undermines self-determination by excluding those closest to the issues from decision-making... Further, filling governance positions with people who benefit from the existing neoliberal structure means the work of non-profits is less likely to challenge the status quo and may actually perpetuate the same inequitable systems that nonprofits claim to oppose."

To avoid tokenism and really meaningfully pursue a flatter power structure in which people have agency in the decisions that affect their lives, we need to

SOCIAL JUSTICE & JEDI PERSPECTIVE

Strengths

- Decision-making and meaningful influence is happening outside board structures
- End users achieve self-determination through their channels of influence

Limits

- Not generally addressing logics and beliefs around capability to govern head on
- Assumes motivation to govern

⁴ Kirstyn Morley, "Reimagining Non-Profit Governance through a Social Justice Lens" (Edmonton: Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations, June 19, 2021).

⁵ Ibid 13



broaden our field of vision beyond a small board and see the open field of governance opportunities:

"...when you think about some of the functions of governance, some of them are highly generative and strategic and some of them are highly administrative or operational or oversight. We don't necessarily think of governance as a complex system that connects organizations to community to clients to members. I'm interested in exploring how we have created a system where governance is about board members and not about governance."

What, then, can we imagine beyond traditional board governance? What does it look like to expand decision-making to populations historically excluded, including how to support the motivation and participation of those who don't start with desire to govern, are economically precarious, and/or doubt their capability to contribute?



HUMAN-CENTRED DESIGN PERSPECTIVE

Imagination is at the heart of design, and design has long been at the heart of our practice. By going through loops of observing, making, and testing with the people who use a product, experience or service, design can make visible 'what is' and generate ideas for 'what could be.' We find co-design methods, in particular, can help us to close the gap, informing and shaping a set of possible solutions. Co-design differs from traditional community consultation and engagement processes because it never starts with a finite list of options, and it avoids the rabbit-hole of staying in the realm of talk.

Instead, co-design involves mocking up possibilities, on paper or through an experience, to garner reactions and spark people's ideas for how something might work, why they would or wouldn't engage with it, and to what end. Initial provocations are often quite rough and incomplete, inviting people to change or reject them and start fresh. In this way, we can engage a broad range of people who avoid boardrooms in the generation and testing of alternative supports and interactions. Co-design is an effective method for intentionally pursuing the influence and perspectives of people an organization serves or wants to serve better, in their own settings. It is an accessible way for people to develop and share things that they might not even have words for - their needs, preferences, values, and motivations. Importantly, it can engender a sense of ownership and contribution among participants.

And yet, there are real limits to co-design. The limits we are most concerned with are around decision-making; specifically, transparency and authority. Co-design participants can have a big effect on the outcome of a design process. They provide data to a designer when they express or simply demonstrate what works for them, how they imagine something happening, in what order, and the designer interprets that data, giving it shape and form, to tweak the intervention. The volley of an iterative process provides an opportunity for participants to say 'no, you got it wrong; it should be more like this', or 'what if...' but

HUMAN-CENTRED DESIGN PERSPECTIVE

Strengths

- Offers ways to engage marginalized stakeholders in shaping supports and services
- Frames self-determination as a work of creativity, not just a rationality
- Honours tacit knowledge

Limits

- Little transparency in decision-making
- Designers can retain control; insights are filtered through their lens
- Everything is ad hoc & emergent



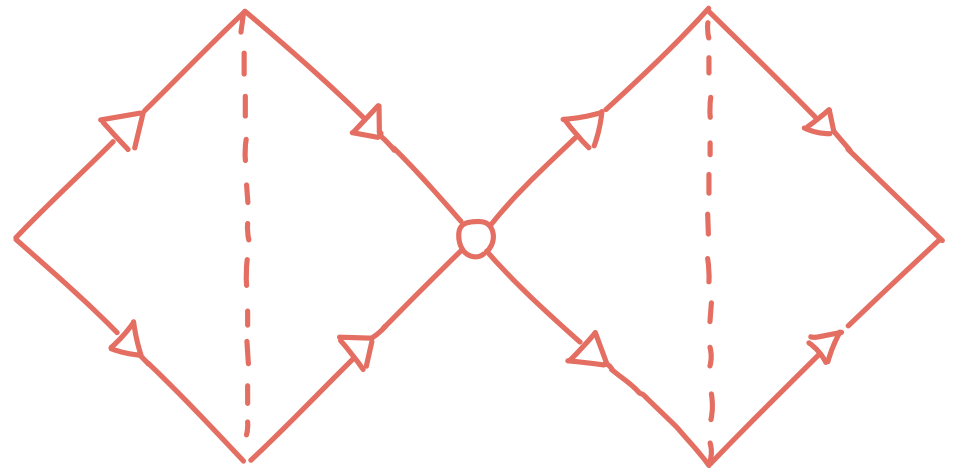


often insights come from the designer's observations of how someone interacts with something. It's never clear to what extent a designer's decisions are shaped by their own biases (or those of a client or funder), or constrained by their reference points or beliefs.

A connected issue that's central to our governance inquiry, is about who calls the shots for a prototype. Our team makes thousands of operational and strategic decisions in the early stages of a prototype, based on our values, experience, and knowledge. We are a team with years of experience that makes us sensitive to the ways in which choices challenge or replicate dominant systems. Of course, our knowledge reflects a particular and limited perspective, and community co-designers also have a claim to some ownership of our prototypes. We recognize that their involvement and stewardship can be a protective factor against the perpetuation of dominant systems' logic. But how do you graduate from co-designer of an idea to co-governor of a growing prototype?

We have long been inspired by the work of social systems designer Bela Banathy whose work aims to equip people to design the systems within which they live. Banathy acknowledges that *"the behaviour of designers depends on their image of society and the image they have about the function of the system they wish to create."*⁶ Banathy's concern is not to make designers more objective, but to make everyone designers.

*"Even if people fully develop their potential, they cannot give direction to their lives, they cannot forge their destiny, they cannot take charge of their future—unless they also develop competence to take part directly and authentically in the design of the systems in which they live and work, and reclaim their right to do so. This is what true empowerment is about."*⁷



⁶ I. Bela H. Banathy, *Designing Social Systems in a Changing World* (New York, NY: Plenum Press, 1996), 69.

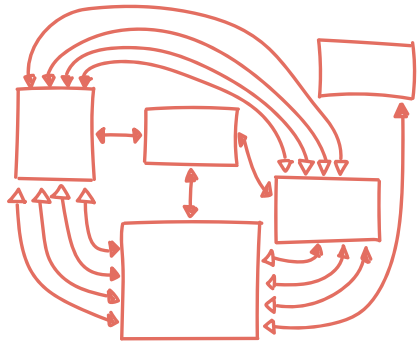
⁷ *Ibid*, vii.



TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

Banathy advocated transformative education and building skills that would allow people to become truly free. He was a contemporary of Paolo Freire, the father of critical pedagogy, another one of our guiding lights. Both Freire and Banathy believed people must be participants in their own liberation and that the path there was one of developing critical awareness, literacy, and problem-solving skills. Both were sensitive to power and its structures, teaching people to question hierarchies. Both worked to extend the tools of liberation beyond the elite: Banathy's work was responsible for turning the Boy Scouts into an organization that taught leadership skills to every boy, and Freire developed his methods and philosophy with poor and illiterate citizens. Freire wrote *"attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects that must be saved from a burning building."*⁸ Banathy's sentiments were similar: *"We have two choices. We can relegate authority and responsibility to others who represent us, as we do today. Or we can empower ourselves by acquiring design literacy and competence."*⁹

For Banathy, design was an essential problem-solving tool; he noted, *"Design is the intellectual activity of changing existing situations into desired ones."*¹⁰ While both Freire and Banathy were concerned with democratizing the means for self-liberation, they relied heavily on the power of intellect and critical reason to do so. They seem to regard these aptitudes as skills to be developed in any human, rather than inherent qualities. We recognize the value in a developmental process that scaffolds learning, alongside the growth of confidence and sensitization around how power moves in a social space. But we wonder, is critical reason the best pathway to liberation for all individuals, including those with intellectual disabilities? What might be other routes to raising awareness and motivation?



TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

Strengths

- A developmental pathway to liberation & self-determination (self-governance)
- Strong analysis of power and hierarchy

Limits

- Focuses on rationality and critical reason as the way to achieve liberation -- rather than embodied, emotionally engaged, and/or phenomenological approaches

⁸ Freire, Paolo. 2000, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Bloomsbury, New York. p.65

⁹ 1996. Banathy, *Designing Social Systems in a changing world*. New York: Springer Science and Business Media, p37

¹⁰ Ibid, 17



ANARCHISM, MUTUAL AID, AND TRADITIONAL INDIGENOUS APPROACHES

In the pursuit of examples of values-driven governance, we talked with Associate Professor in the School of Indigenous Studies and inaugural Assistant Vice-President of Indigenous Initiatives at Carleton University, Kahente Horn-Miller. Horn-Miller works with her own Mohawk community of Kahnawá:ke to breathe new life into traditional approaches to community decision-making.¹¹ In Mohawk tradition, the act of being heard is a paramount value. Leaders demonstrate that they have listened by repeating back what each person has said. Even if the ultimate decision isn't favourable to each participant, the process retains legitimacy if each person feels they have been listened to. Horn-Miller worked with Kahnawá:ke as it adapted these traditions to a contemporary community decision about membership. The experiment revealed that the process was as popular as it was time-consuming. Community members were eager and committed.

The Institute for Anarchist Studies¹² revised its own process not too long before we spoke to Board representative Lara Messersmith-Glavin. They were concerned with how decision makers on their board related to each other and whether they were able to build respectful and trusting relationships by living out the anarchist principle of mutual aid. They changed the rhythm of their work in order to ensure everyone wasn't stressed and over-burdened at the same time, enabling better mutual support. They also created an annual members meeting dedicated to discussing how best to live out their principles in the current climate and context, creating a much more specific mandate to guide board decisions throughout the year.

We found that, while distinct, Mohawk and anarchist approaches shared much in common as they both drew on principles of direct democracy that highly value the right to be heard and understood in decision-making processes, the results of which will affect participants (and their descendants). Both approaches are highly attuned to relational dynamics, including the foundation of a community in which participants have roles or ways to contribute. Both approaches value rituals that remind participants of the purpose of what they are doing together. And, notably, they both required a much more significant time commitment than is the norm in organizational decision-making.

ANARCHISM, MUTUAL AID & TRADITIONAL INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE

Strengths

- More relational approaches to governance
- Based on community belonging & shared values rather than status or competencies

Limits

- Time consuming—both to make decisions and build relationships

¹¹ Kahente Horn-Miller, "What Does Indigenous Participatory Democracy Look Like? Kahnawá:ke's Community Decision-making Process," *Review of Constitutional Studies*, 2013, 18, no. 1 (2013): 111–32, https://doi.org/https://www.constitutionalstudies.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/05_Horn-Miller-1-1.pdf.

¹² "About," *The Institute for Anarchist Studies*, 2023, <https://anarchiststudies.org/about-2/>.



The principle that people should be able to make themselves heard, and have influence in decisions that directly affect them resonated with us. And yet, we recognized that the context of a community in which people hold roles and participate in mutual aid is a significant condition for building trust, respect, motivation, and self esteem. It's also a condition that is often not present in the disability space, due to exclusionary and patronizing practices and structures. Even outside of the disability space, community roles are often determined by participation in the market economy, are hierarchized, and may be obligatory rather than freely undertaken (eg. there is a lot of pressure to have a paying job in order to be considered a 'contributing' citizen and someone worthy of respect.) Many are left out and find that making contributions and building respectful relationships in community is a privilege of those with good income or esteemed professional roles, or those who can choose to volunteer.

What we've learned

Our search for answers only heightened our appetite for more concrete examples of other ways of doing and thinking about governance! The more we encountered prevailing ideas around governance, the more we realized we had a perspective, some uncompromising values, and a lot of questions about how to draw unusual suspects into governance. So we widened our net.



INSPIRATION (AND MORE QUESTIONS)

As social designers and researchers, when we are unhappy with what is, we go looking for new reference points and inspiration. Normally, we don't limit ourselves to examples from the social sector, but seek out some wildly different examples which share some, but not all, of our constraints and aspirations. However, due to the common legal environments of the non-profit sector (namely, the imposition of board governance), we found it most helpful to set our sights there. To gain a better sense of the landscape, we connected with eight different organizations across the social innovation and nonprofit fields who have moved away from the traditional board model while still satisfying legal requirements similar to our jurisdictions in Canada. We were curious about the alternative governance models already out there. What can we learn from others' experimentation?

Our hope was to find governance forms which allow different kinds of people to play a meaningful role in collective decision-making. People with cognitive disabilities rarely find themselves in decision-making positions outside of representative or tokenistic capacities. We passionately want Curiko and Soloss to be different. We want our community and network members to have a meaningful say and be part of a governance model that creates the conditions for people to surface their desires around power and decision-making, and to pursue them. We embarked on our next round of research with a thirst for learning about what others have already tried to bring a similar vision to life.

A FOCUS ON STRUCTURE & FUNCTION

Because we were focused on finding a governance model as the basis for creating the conditions for a different kind of "governing", the original questions we asked in our interviews with organizations were quite structure- and function-oriented:

- What separates 'good' governance from governance?
- How are decisions being made?
- How do formal and informal governance structures intersect?
- How does purpose influence or shape the governance structure of an organization?
- Where have you seen structures that allow for a redefinition of risk?

Given the legal requirement of a board for any registered nonprofit in Canada, we also had a series of questions that poked at potential alternatives to or remedies for traditional board dynamics.

- When we think of governance, we tend to think of boards. Are there models of governance that do not involve boards?
- How does the board interact with other levels of governance?
- What problems were non-profit boards designed to solve? For whom? Under what conditions?
- Can boards be improved? Or do we need to disrupt the whole model?



KEY INSIGHTS FROM INTERVIEWS

Here are the practitioners and professionals we interviewed in our search for insight and learning.

Babs (Barbara) Weber is the interim facilitator at Alberta Social Innovation Connect. As a historian by training, she gave us a rundown of the history of traditional governance boards.

Alison Brewin is a nonprofit management consultant at Alison Brewin Consulting, specializing in purpose driven governance. She serves as the Chair of Governance and Co-Vice Chair on the UBC Board of Governors.

Ants Cabraal is one of the founding members of Enspiral, a global network that prototypes different ways of building decentralized community-led organizations. Ants was involved in the creation of both Loomio and Greater Than. He's supported many early-stage ventures and now mostly works as a writer and consultant.

Michael Elwood-Smith is a Loomio cooperative member and startup coach, as well as Director at Grow My Own Business, a New Zealand-based design agency. Loomio is a discussion-based decision-making software designed to help organizations make collaborative decisions.

Susan Basterfield is a partner at Greater Than, a network of coaches and consultants whose mission is to help companies organize in a way that supports their purpose. Greater Than facilitates the transformation of organizational structures towards collaborative governance models.

Trish Wheatly is the CEO and co-leader of Disability Arts Online, a disability-led online visual arts and performance magazine. DAO publishes an online arts journal and offers disabled artists a platform to share their thoughts, artwork, and projects.

Vanessa LeBourdais is the CEO of DreamRider Productions, an environmental educational media nonprofit for elementary school children based in Vancouver. Vanessa published an article on "Evolutionary Governance" in 2020. Practicing intuitive leadership as the CEO, she took her board on a journey away from traditional modes of decision-making.

Jan Perkins announced her exit as the CEO of Tautoko Options Support Services, New Zealand, in 2017. Over the course of 3 years, Jan partnered with Greater Than to transform Tautoko into a self-organized service provider for folks with disability.



“Because I have higher social standing than you, it is my duty to take care of you.”

A LESSON IN HISTORY

To understand how we have come to accept the current nonprofit governance structure as the norm, we talked to Babs Weber, Facilitator at Alberta Social Innovation Connect, historian, and experienced board member herself.

What’s the origin story of nonprofit boards?

Babs: *“We have to go back to the way philanthropy as a whole was set up in Western cultures. The English courts back in the Elizabethan times [implemented] what was called ‘the poor laws’. At the time of the Reformation, a lot of people moved into cities and were now falling through the cracks. [When before,] people had been in their own villages, they would have had help from the parish itself if they ran into hard times. It’s really easy to have empathy for the people we know well. It’s harder to have that empathy for someone who’s a complete stranger. So, [the cities] need some sort of mechanism to allow for poverty reduction. They had this idea that the people who were poor and not working, that something was wrong with their soul, that they just needed more gumption. So the poor laws set up poor houses that*

were basically workhouses run by governors who were often of the class of nobility.”

The idea was that poor people lacked an authoritative structure and space to fulfill their duty to work which, in turn, would save their souls. Those who held social status and controlled resources also bore moral

MAIN TAKEAWAYS

Key insight

Boards come out of the same logic as philanthropy: They uphold and reproduce the power dynamic of the status quo.

Implication for Curiko & Soloss

The traditional board structure appears incompatible with the radical premise of Curiko and Soloss. Our challenge is to create a structure that supports the shift in power dynamic that Soloss/Curiko aim to bring to life.



“Boards and nonprofit organizations are a tax structure, not a way of life.”

authority over what it meant to do good, i.e. work and contribute to maintaining the existing social order.

Babs: *“It’s a very patriarchal system: ‘Because I have higher social standing than you, it is my duty to take care of you. I decide what’s best for you even though I haven’t lived anything close to your life.’”*

The charity logic that drives social systems such as those designed by the poor laws still dominates the philanthropic sector today. Disproportionate wealth is justified by giving away part of it as an act of charity and good will. In other words, the ethical stain of disproportionate wealth is seemingly cleansed by donating one’s money, time, and resources to ‘taking care of the poor.’

Babs: *“Those are some of the characteristics that still define today how boards tend to run. Often, people on boards are people who have the time and money to dedicate themselves to a philanthropic cause. They end up connecting on a very infrequent basis, once a month or four times a year. The larger an organization becomes, the more of a disconnect there can be. Especially because we have this concept that people on a board can’t get paid. It’s something that you do out of a sense of duty to give back to the less fortunate. And, of course, that’s a real power dynamic.”*

That power dynamic is reflective of the social order that distributes resources unequally and marginalizes particular groups of people in the first place.



Reproducing this order within the governance structure of our prototypes and organizations only creates a microcosm of what already exists. It softens wealth and power disparity, but does not transform. To create a governance structure that reflects and supports the radical premise of prototypes like Soloss and Curiko, we need to question the logic behind traditional boards and rethink their function in governance.

Babs: *“Boards and nonprofit organizations are a tax structure, not a way of life. We tend to think of nonprofits as always for the greater good. No. It’s a tax structure that is set up by our government tax acts.”*

If we think of boards as a tax structure rather than the core of our governance structure, what are the opportunities that arise that allow us to reshape who gets to steer our organizations and how we make decisions together?



“The tighter the control, the more an organization loses its capacity to do really interesting things and grow.”



A LESSON IN LAW

To get a better sense of how much room there is to play within the legal requirements in Canada, we spoke with Alison Brewin, a nonprofit management consultant who specializes in ‘purpose-driven governance.’

Alison: *“The legal framework that [boards] function in is much more flexible than the lawyers and accountants tell you it is. It’s infinitely more flexible. There is a basic legal oversight role for a board to play. In reality, the minimum that they can get away with is meeting once a year to go through financials and making sure that no one’s breaking the law.”*

If a board operates only in accordance with these minimum legal requirements, it is referred to as “a minimum viable board.” An MVB is the version of the traditional board with the least amount of decision-making power and thus influence over the strategic vision and daily undertakings of an organization.

Alison: *“The minimum number of board members is three. There is no requirement on how to organize them. There’s no law that says we need a chair or a*



treasurer...With a minimum viable board, you can have advisory committees for strategic decision-making that are being paid.”

In the nonprofit space, the norm is to offer board positions on a volunteer basis. The most common

MAIN TAKEAWAYS

Key insight

The minimum legal requirements for boards are:

- Ensure finances are in order
- Oversee the organization is working towards its mission

Implication for Curiko & Soloss

We may not need a board to govern prototypes, or it may play a minimized role, freeing up capacity to invite other kinds of engagement. We still need to envision what an anti-board might look like.



“Trust is the best preventative medicine for any potential legal crisis.”

argument for this mandatory volunteerism is “to avoid conflict of interest.” Board members ought to make decisions in the best interest of the organization with no personal compensation compromising their judgment. There is no law that prohibits organizations from paying their board members unless an organization decides to add such an agreement to their by-laws. An organizational culture of ‘playing it safe’ also comes to bear on membership policies. In Alison’s experience, many of her fellow lawyers advise nonprofits to limit their membership to avoid members getting out of control and voting for bad decisions. This anti-democratic risk aversion can stifle an organization’s creative spirit.

Alison: *“The tighter the control, the more an organization loses its capacity to do really interesting things and grow. Because boards are so risk averse.”*

Rather than letting lawyers steer an organization away from any potential risk, she advises a structure based on trust.

Alison: *“Trust is the best preventative medicine for any potential legal crisis. If you have a structure that allows people to trust each other and members feel like they are engaged and can participate in the decisions, then you get less court cases.”*

What would a structure that grows and nurtures trust between members, staff, and governors look like?



“There was a crisis that happened and the board was not equipped to deal with it. It became this giant disaster.”

LEARNINGS FROM A FAILED EXPERIMENT

In 2015, Vanessa LeBourdais, CEO of Dreamrider Productions, took her organization on one such journey of trust-based governance. Her inspiration: “Evolutionary Governance.” At the core of this governance approach lies the intuition of the CEO as the guiding principle for organizational decision-making. With a minimum viable board as a starting point, Dreamrider Productions plunged into a three year experiment of transforming their way of governing the organization.

Vanessa: “Before we start, I know you’re here to talk about Evolutionary Governance, but I have to let you know: we failed.”

What was the original vision, and what went wrong?

Vanessa: “One day, we started focusing our playful, emergent design expertise on the issue of our governance and began an experiment...[Evolutionary governance] offers an alternate pathway away from outdated systems of colonial rights and structural legacies.”¹³

The goal: To build trust between the CEO, staff, and the board. Vanessa’s personal motivation to transform the relationships between herself and the board was her experience of a deeply felt sense of loneliness in her role. Prioritizing her intuition as a means of decision-making meant she was able to share her internal experience with others.

MAIN TAKEAWAYS

Key insight

What works in good times doesn’t necessarily withstand crisis situations. The board needs to be ‘on board.’

Implication for Curiko & Soloss

It is not enough to have leadership with strongly held values. For true bottom-up governance, members need to be able to shape those values, and make explicit choices over how they will contribute.

¹³ Vanessa Le Bourdais et al., “Evolutionary Governance: Part 1 - Principles,” Medium (blog) (Medium, September 16, 2020), <https://vanessalebourdais.medium.com/evolutionary-governance-part-i-principles-772e18345881>.



“One of our values is fun. How is being a board member fun?”

Vanessa: *“I can come to the board with my anxiety, fears, concerns, as soon as they arise, without fear of ‘How will the board react?’. The board holds space for me, ... and senses into what truly needs to happen now.”¹⁴*

While inspirational, the language around “alternate pathway to colonial legacies” and “holding space to sense into what is needed” did not sufficiently equip the team at Dreamrider Productions to deal with the complex realities of real life crises. Today, three years after the initial success of Dreamrider’s evolutionary governance experiment, Vanessa has come up against a roadblock.

Vanessa: *“I feel this obligation to tell you ‘Oh it was so wonderful!’ It was such a beautiful feeling as an ED to be like ‘I don’t feel alone’ when others did. Well, then I felt alone. There was a crisis that happened and the board was not equipped to deal with it. It became this giant disaster. I felt alone; disconnected, and not listened to.”*

What went wrong? Looking back, Vanessa thinks the board wasn’t as involved as she thought they were in the process of transforming the organization.

Vanessa: *“I realized ‘Oh that was me—evolutionary governance—that wasn’t really them.’ Even though they wrote it, they weren’t able to hold it in themselves in a crisis.”*

The question that comes up is: What makes a governance model resilient in the face of crisis?

Vanessa: *“What do you do when the board leaves the values behind? One of the things that I’ve realized is that I did not bring the values of the organization fully into the board. One of our values is fun. How is being a board member fun?”*

Fun, is an experience and way of being that is most obviously absent from the idea of a traditional governance board. How do we ensure that alternative ways of decision-making persist in moments of crisis without having the institutional support of traditional governance? What does it look like to hold space for fun and play as an organization confronts great risk?

¹⁴ Vanessa Le Bourdais et al., “Evolutionary Governance: Part 1 - Principles,” Medium (blog) (Medium, September 16, 2020), <https://vanessalebourdais.medium.com/evolutionary-governance-part-i-principles-772e18345881..>



“For us, there was a whole lot of capacity that got built around distributed leadership.”

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO SUSTAIN AN ORGANIZATION?

For an organization to sustain itself without relying on formal governance structures, two factors are crucial: The story people show up for and the infrastructure that unlocks the value people stick around for. Ants Cabraal, founding member of Enspiral, a global network that prototypes different ways of building decentralized community-led organizations, shared Enspiral’s initial story: “We’re a collective of entrepreneurs and we want to help more people to work on stuff that matters. We want to radically share money, information, and control. We want to ensure transparency of how resources are allocated.” At its best, this story inspires people to show up, a condition that is both necessary and insufficient for a collective to self-organize, grow, and sustain itself.

Ants: “All of these fancy, beautiful terms that paint a picture of how utopia might feel like [come] with no way in hell of understanding how we’re actually going to do it.”

MAIN TAKEAWAYS

Key insight

People show up for a story that moves them, and stick around for a value they are experiencing, and that matters to them on a personal level.

Organizations need infrastructure to unlock that value.

Invest in cultivating group identity.

Collective decision-making needs facilitation.

Implication for Curiko & Soloss

The spectrum of stakeholders at Curiko/Soloss is very diverse. Will everyone show up for the same story or do we need different stories?

We may need to test a variety of value propositions to find out if joy/fun is enough.

Can we decentralize facilitation roles? What’s needed to do that?

What capacities and conditions does one need to self-govern?



“Collective identity becomes real when people care about something enough to decide on it together.”



What was needed was a different kind of infrastructure. Loomio, one of Enspiral’s ventures, a software company that provides a platform for discussion based collaborative decision-making, became the tool that unlocked the value which made people stick around in moments when the story had lost its inspirational pull.

Ants: *“The reason we showed up was that nice story and that nice intent. But the actual reason folks stuck around for was the value that got unlocked in all the invisible things that happened as a result of trying out different ways of making decisions together. For us, there was a whole lot of capacity that got built around distributed leadership.”*

All of these invisible things, the real value, came to be when the team created a space where people make decisions together. With the absence of hierarchy and central decision-making, every team member becomes a potentially consequential decision maker.

Ants: *“All of a sudden, people grow. They grow new skills that they didn’t know they had because they didn’t need to ask permission.”*

Creating a space wherein everyone becomes a decision maker with equal say does not command the absence of structure. In fact, it’s the opposite.

Ants: *“There’s always a facilitator and a designer, a named or unnamed power. I think it’s unhelpful to think about it as ‘everyone’s in a soup’. Actually, it’s a few people orchestrating the soup, and everyone else is contributing what they need to contribute at the right time in a way that’s actually quite structured.”*

In this carefully curated open space, team members discovered for themselves their capacity to make decisions and to contribute to a decision in a way that is needed. Experiencing themselves as consequential decision makers, as someone whose contribution matters, was worth sticking around for. On a collective level, team members started to adapt a sense of shared identity which then created a sense of belonging. Again, a value worth committing to.

Ants: *“The other big thing is a sense of identity. Collective identity becomes real when people care about something enough to decide on it together.”*

Enspiral created a space where people can discover for themselves their ability to make decisions and where collective identity emerges out of a shared cause rather than it being imposed from above. People showed up for a story that inspired; they stuck around for a value they discovered within themselves while sharing a space with others. The outcome is an organizational structure that has a better chance at withstanding crises.

Ants: *“That [collective identity] created a whole lot of long term resilience in the organization.”*



“We work in a high trust environment so we don’t need the formality.”



INFRASTRUCTURE

We spoke to Loomio cooperative member and startup coach, Michael Elwood-Smith. Loomio is a worker-owned cooperative that helps people make collaborative decisions about matters that affect them. The idea for Loomio originally came from activists of the Occupy movement and the realization that most people have no say in the decisions that affect them most, if 1% of the population controls 99% of our resources.

Michael: *“We work with a whole lot of decision processes, not just consensus, which is typically used for governance, and boards, and committees.”*

At Loomio, trust and personal relationships have replaced formal processes.

Michael: *“We’re not particularly good at formal decision-making processes. We work in a high trust environment so we don’t need the formality.”*

Building relationships and trust takes time -- time that Michael did not think they had when he first joined the team.

MAIN TAKEAWAYS

Key insight

Participation and sense of contribution matters more than making ‘the right’ decision.

Living into values takes time and commitment.

Bringing values to life is a way of thinking and working that starts at the governance level.

Implication for Curiko & Soloss

How do we strengthen or bring out people’s sense of contribution?

Start at values, not structure; let structure emerge rather than impose it from above.



“What we were trying to embody was a culture, a way of thinking, and a way of working together.”



Michael: *“Initially, I thought, ‘goodness, this is just getting in the way of getting stuff done. We’ve gotta get out on the market, and here we are sitting in a circle, listening to each other.’ There was a little frustration to begin with. With time, I realized that what we were trying to do was much more than an app. What we were trying to embody was a culture, a way of thinking, and a way of working together. You can only do that if you have it in your heart. That realization was huge.”*

The payoff was worth it. Being a contributor in a decision-making process was part of what Ants described as the long term resilience organizations develop when people experience their contributions as consequential.

Michael: *“[By virtue of being involved], people still saw a decision as a good decision for the community, even if the decision wasn’t ‘right’ or the one they would have made individually.”*

Being able to participate in the process and having a say turned out to be more important than whether or not people’s personal choices aligned with the final group decision.



“It’s really about reorienting these roles around areas that people have energy for and will derive joy from.”

THE SELF ORGANIZING MODEL

Susan Basterfield, partner at Greater Than, a network of coaches and consultants whose mission is to help companies organize in a way that supports their purpose, understands the power of participation and people’s sense of authorship over decision-making processes. Greater Than is a consulting organization that asks if the way we organize is in service of what we are trying to do. How we organize impacts our ability to bring about a particular change in the world.

Susan: *“The current paradigm of organizing is like the water that we swim in. We don’t even notice it because it’s become so much part of who we are.”*

Through coaching, the team at Greater Than helps organizations to become a self-organizing team whose organizational structure and processes are in direct service of the impact they want to have in the world. That being said, for nonprofits, the board structure is an inevitable legal requirement. The team at Greater Than has experimented with reforming the traditional governance board:

MAIN TAKEAWAYS

Key insight

Radical transparency is a condition of self-organizing governance.

Happy Money Stories is a practice that supports agency, transparency, and a collective mindset.

Joyful roles affirm the value of contribution rather than playing on obligation, status, or guilt.

Implication for Curiko & Soloss

If governance roles come with honorarium/payment, can we introduce something like happy money stories?

How do we centre joy and redesign roles in governance?

Commitment challenge: what are the priorities we are competing with? How do we motivate folks to commit to something they don’t know?



Susan: *"We have a minimum viable board. We're not like a traditional board. We do not have anything to do with strategy or decision-making. We are only holding the context of compliance and system health basically."*

Being a board member is not a role advertised with prestige but as an opportunity for self-development. The personal and professional boundaries are softened through a structure that supports purpose by design. At Greater Than, being a board member is a joyful role.

Susan: *"It's really about reorienting these roles around areas that people have energy for and will derive joy from. Being on the board is not some sort of ultimate step. Some of these roles come from self-identification and some from a bit of shoulder tapping. Something like, 'Hey, you've been saying that you would like to develop in this area, and I think being on the board could be a really great experience for you.'"*

The very idea of self-organizing allows people to create and continuously shape their roles. Members at Greater Than even go one step further and participate in the distribution of salaries.

Susan: *"We almost fully distribute our money through a practice called Happy Money Stories. The way this works is, let's say there's a particular retainer gig that three of us work on. Let's say it's \$5000 a month. At the end of every month, we get together and tell the story of what happened that month. That story might be, 'I felt like I had a pretty heavy month. So I feel like my contribution was a little more than last month.' We also do a round of asking about people's financial*

needs that month. We divvy up the money per story that we've heard. We reflect together and choose the distribution that makes everybody the happiest."

The level of transparency created through a practice like Happy Money Stories exceeds average nonprofit bookkeeping customs. Susan reminds us that self-organizing at this level requires "a lot of autonomy and agency." A requirement that poses more of a hurdle for some people than for others. All of Greater Than and Enspiral's employees are working professionals, the majority coming from an institutional academic background. Self organizing amongst people with and without disabilities might look different and require a different set up than what Greater Than provides as a template.



“It’s very time and labour intensive to facilitate that, but that’s what’s needed if you want people with those quite high access needs to be able to make proper governance decisions.”

REFORMING TRADITIONAL GOVERNANCE

Trish Wheatly, CEO and co-leader of Disability Arts Online, an online art magazine by and for people with disabilities, knows what it really takes to stretch the bounds of the traditional nonprofit governance model. In 2018, the organization committed to have no less than 80% of their board members as people who identify as having a disability. A daunting goal, especially when one is still operating within conventional paradigms of expertise and professionalism that exclude and/or marginalize people with disability per se.

Trish: “[80%] is really tough to meet all the time. It’s not easy. But it’s a commitment to making sure that there’s never a point at which non disabled people can take over the organization and steer it in a direction that we don’t want to go.”

Meeting the 80% quota becomes especially challenging when they are confronted with norms that prescribe rationality and expertise for certain roles:

MAIN TAKEAWAYS

Key insight

Governors’ who are past contributors have a different stake in the organization, and can be ‘cheerleaders.’

Time and labour-intensive to do co-leadership well.

Implication for Curiko & Soloss

Develop conditions for people to make governance decisions, perhaps partnering people with more/less experience and/or different abilities.

Set goals for self-governance.



“I think good governance can be taught fairly easily. We’re more interested in people’s other skills.”



Trish: *“The treasurer role is the most challenging one for us to fill. When it comes to legal or financial expertise it’s much more challenging to find people. In the past, we definitely used our 20% non disabled people to fulfill these roles.”*

The same logic has shaped staff decisions: when the stakes are high from a legal and performance standpoint, people without disability take the lead- at least, on paper.

Trish: *“We’re disabled-led with a non disabled CEO. I felt like the CEO position in its requirement to maintain the business, do fundraising and partnership work, is very much a supportive role to the artistic vision. I don’t get involved in editorial decisions.”*

The idea of being a supporter and sharing roles has become DAO’s main tool to renegotiate power within the bounds of the traditional nonprofit structure. In a recent theatre project called “Transforming leadership”, people with and without disabilities were paired to share roles. Every board meeting was preceded by a prep-meeting.

Trish: *“It’s very time and labour intensive to facilitate that, but that’s what’s needed if you want people with those quite high access needs to be able to make proper governance decisions.”*

What does it take to make “proper governance decisions”?

Trish: *“I think good governance can be taught fairly easily. We’re more interested in people’s other skills.”*

At DAO, the board holds a cheerleading function. Most board members have, at one time, also been commissioned as artists or writers for the magazine. They all have a stake in the success of DAO.

Trish: *“They’re all really passionate about what we’re doing as an organization. They have a role of telling us we’ve done good when we’ve done good, and they get really excited about it which is great!”*

Board positions are unpaid. Voluntary positions avoid conflict of interest but they also exclude people without the financial means to volunteer. Nonprofit funding structures set up this predicament. To involve members in decision-making beyond volunteerism, DAO implements “project committees” on honorary bases. In 2020, a committee gathered to discuss and decide how DAO was to enter a period of racial reckoning. All positions were paid.



“The values steward is responsible for making sure that all decisions align with our values.”

VALUES-LED GOVERNANCE

In 2017, Jan, CEO of Tautoko Support Services, a disability service provider in New Zealand, decided to step down.

Jan: *“I asked around but nobody wanted to take on my position. So I started doing some research. I didn’t want an outsider leading the organization that I built. That’s when I discovered self-management as an alternative to finding a new CEO.”*

With the help of Susan and Greater Than, Tautoko embarked on a 5 year long journey towards transforming their governance structure.

Jan: *“Our vision is that the people for whom we provide support will be able to identify when and how they manage their own support and give direction to our team [as to] how best to meet their needs.”*

They established small working groups that explore different areas of change and development. The areas of focus are: values, induction, organizational scaffold, communication, and a virtual fishbowl that tests out ideas and reports back to the whole organization. The

MAIN TAKEAWAYS

Key insight

Values are at the centre of shifting governance structure.

It takes time.

Implication for Curiko & Soloss

If we want our Curiko and Soloss members to have a meaningful say in governance, we need to let go of efficiency and efficacy as measures of success.

The shift: Rather than imposing a structure on a set of values, we focus on inhabiting the values and thereby create a space for structure to eventually emerge.



“I felt reasonably comfortable with letting go of everyday decisions, but I’ve struggled and still do with not imposing deadlines.”

heart of their self management structure is the values working group.

Jan: *“We really focused on the values as our anchor for everything. We created a new role, the values steward. Whoever took on that role was given a booklet with all our values. The values steward is responsible for making sure that all decisions align with our values. If that’s not the case, they will raise the booklet in any given meeting and bring everyone back to discussing the values before making a decision.”*

Working groups are made up of people with and without disabilities. Each group uses self-management processes to structure their work load and to organize their actioning towards self-identified goals. Handing over control and decision-making to staff and community members has asked Jan to let go of certain expectations around pace and time:

Jan: *“I have stepped back from my role as CEO and I’m now Tautoko Services lead. The key aspects that are disappearing from my role are around content decision-making. I felt reasonably comfortable with letting go of everyday decisions, but I’ve struggled and still do with not imposing deadlines. I wanted to keep things moving at a pace that I’m used to.”*

These days, Jan mainly sees her role as holding the vision throughout the transitioning process and role modeling what self-management looks like. Moving from well established organizational structures into a field of emergence can be daunting. Discomfort and not-knowing are inevitable.

Jan: *“Some of our staff took a long time to come on board. They only grudgingly came along. It’s all about patience. Now, after 5 years, they have accepted our new self managing structure. They may still not like it, but they’re no longer opposing either.”*

Satisfying different stakeholders with different objectives, desires, and starting points poses a challenge for an organization that wishes to transform its governance structure. Some gaps are harder to bridge than others. The finance working group, for example, does not currently have a member with a disability. No one signed up for it.

Jan’s closing words of advice: *“It takes time.”*



“What is the discomfort that keeps each of us from forming freely given, reciprocal relationships with folks with developmental disabilities?”

AND YET...

We started our interview series with a curiosity around alternative governance structures. We left with a whiff of dissatisfaction and discouragement. While Tautoko offered a promising example of how we might meaningfully involve people with disability in decision-making processes, the kinds of decisions community members are making at Tautoko (i.e. how to self manage supports) are a little different from the kinds of decisions at Curiko and Soloss. Curiko and Soloss are not service providers, but spaces where community members can create and be part of experiences that matter to them.

The interviews generated helpful insights about what has and has not worked for others, and still we were left feeling dissatisfied and discouraged. While the self-governing model offers a compelling alternative to traditional board governance, our people, folks from the margins and folks with disability, do not always fit the presumed standards of autonomy and self-mastery that self management models require. We found interesting alternative governance structures, but none of them was the right fit for the radical premise of Curiko and Soloss. It takes a certain tolerance for discomfort and a certain level of appreciation for disruption in order to govern non-normative spaces like Curiko and Soloss.

Traditional measures of success like efficiency and effectiveness neither seem to appeal to most of our community members nor do they leave room for the playful, ruckus character of Curiko and Soloss to unfold. The challenge for us, more so than for anyone we talked to, is to create a governance space that

allows meaningful participation from stakeholders coming with an incredibly diverse range of lived experiences, ways of knowing, and forms of expression.

Seeking a structure that welcomes people with all kinds of self-expression and reasoning generated unconvincing results. So we asked ourselves: If a funder is someone who is most likely quite familiar with exercising agency via decision-making structures, what would it take for them to want to participate in a non-normative governance space where the normative measures of success that they have mastered are no longer relevant? Dismissed even. That inquiry led us away from looking outside towards looking inside. Because Curiko is our longest running prototype, we started by diving deep there. We realized that in order to understand what it would take to bridge the gaps in lived experience between our funders and community members, we needed to confront our own relationships to people with disabilities.

“What is the discomfort that keeps each of us from forming freely given, reciprocal relationships with folks with developmental disabilities?”

And for those of us who engage with Curiko on a daily basis and indeed hold many relationships with community members:

“What is it that we appreciate about being part of Curiko? What makes this community feel distinct?”



“What is it that we appreciate about being part of Curiko? What makes this community unusual?”

These are some of our reflections:

An uncommon encounter in difference. To be in relationship with someone whose way of being, thinking, acting, and expressing themselves is distinct from own requires ceding control, and wading through discomfort. It takes time and effort to learn how to engage the other. Sixty years have passed since the de-institutionalization movement replaced long-term stays in psychiatric hospitals & medical facilities with social services as the primary organizing structure for the lives of people with developmental disabilities. And yet, most of us do not hold two-way relationships with someone with a cognitive disability for the reasons mentioned above: the social segregation, the fear, our perceived incompetence, the time and effort. A space like Curiko where people with and without disability are invited to share experiences that matter to them is rare. Far more normative is a charity model, rooted in sympathy, which underscores difference -- rather than resonance, which emerges from authentic connection.

Freedom in non-conformity. Given the challenge, what is it that draws each of us to Curiko? What do we appreciate about co-creating a non-normative space with community members with and without disabilities? The answer is as simple as it is special. It's the ruckus spirit. It is remarkably FREEING to be part of a Curiko experience. It brings JOY. The conversations can turn from curious exploration to chaotic excursion within seconds. It's refreshing to tag along for the ride. What emerges inside the Curiko space is surprising, sometimes bemusing, and very often, life-giving. It's this feeling that we want to protect from the pressure to scale, report, evaluate, and conform.

With this realization in mind, we followed Jan's example, turning back to Curiko values. Whichever governance model we choose, it has to be rooted in our foundational beliefs. Whoever becomes a governor for Curiko, their main function is to nurture and enliven these values as we iterate, evolve, and grow.

Curiko values:

- ① We're all wonderfully different and equal.
- ② We can all learn and grow.
- ③ Novelty and discomfort are yummy nutrients for learning and growth.
- ④ Love, belonging, and purpose are as essential as food, shelter, and safety.
- ⑤ We're only free from prejudice and oppression once ALL of us are free.
- ⑥ Meaningful inclusion is rooted in relationships of reciprocity and respect.

Meaningful inclusion is rooted in relationships of reciprocity and respect. What would a governance space look like that is rooted in relationships of reciprocity and respect across difference? What are the conditions we need to create and nurture for relationships of reciprocity and respect across difference to emerge and prevail? Relationships of reciprocity and respect are freely given. They sprout from a desire to be in relationship. Given the discomfort, not-knowing, time and effort that gets in the way of forming relationships with



people whose way of being, thinking, acting, and expressing themselves is so different from the norm, we wondered: How can we spark desire to be in relationships of reciprocity and respect across differences? For all of us: community members with and without disability, hosts, staff, funders, and allies.

Digging deeper into this internal inquiry led us to a shift in our thinking. A shift away from structure and towards desire as the basis for governance. Here's our reasoning: What is the use of a structure, no matter how radically different, if no one wants to be part of it? Likewise, what is the use of a structure if it only attracts folks who already have a desire to hold decision-making power by virtue of their social location?

Any such structure would only reproduce existing social order and the already existing power dynamics that exclude marginalized folks from participating meaningfully in decision-making in the first place. Rather than reinforce and reproduce existing power relations, our intention is to disrupt and redirect these very power dynamics in everything that we do with Curiko and Soloss.

What came out of our interviews with professionals and practitioners across the nonprofit and social innovation space were a range of key learnings about the structures and practices that have or have not worked for others. And, we also gained crucial insight into what has not been tried yet and where our goals and measures of success diverge from others.

Most importantly, we got clear on three things:

- ① **We are no longer seeking an alternative governance structure** for our members and funders to fit into. We want to create a space where freely given relationships of reciprocity and respect across difference can emerge and flourish. Within that space and with those relationships, we will govern.
- ② **Desire is a necessary condition** for freely given relationships of reciprocity and respect across difference.
- ③ Desire-based governance is **inherently relational**.

Now, what?

The reason we felt a deep sense of dissatisfaction with the answers from our interviews was that we were asking the wrong kinds of questions. As we centered our inquiry around structure, we got caught up in asking how we can reform and improve already existing governance models. Questions that prioritize reform are unsatisfying because they do not match our goal of transforming the way we do and think about governance. Rather than improve what already is, we aim to shift and create what could be. Instead of asking, "What are alternative governance structures that we can use as a starting point and retrofit to our community?" we need to be asking:

How can we disrupt and re-direct flows of power within existing governance models in order to create a space where governance is grounded in freely given relationships of reciprocity and respect across difference?

ASKING DIFFERENT QUESTIONS





ASKING DIFFERENT QUESTIONS

Seeking answers to our governance problem led us to steer away from external models and structure towards internal inquiry and relationships. It turns out, solving the governance problem may be a matter of question, not answer. Indeed the answers we get depend on the questions we ask.

Physicist and philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn calls the process of changing questions as a means to generating different answers a “paradigm shift.” A paradigm, in its simplest form, is an unstated world-organizing theory. For Kuhn, scientific revolutions happen whenever enough anomalous data, i.e. findings that are incommensurable with the logic of the prevailing paradigm, accumulates to cause a crisis.

“The usual prelude to [scientific revolutions] is the awareness of anomaly, a set of occurrences that do not fit existing ways of ordering phenomena. The changes that result therefore require ‘putting on a different kind of thinking-cap’, one that renders the anomalous lawlike but that, in the process, also transforms the order exhibited by some other phenomena, previously unproblematic.”¹⁵

While our ambition is not that of pushing for another scientific revolution, the learnings from our conversations in the previous section suggest that we ought to “put on a different kind of thinking hat” if we want to answer the governance question. Traditionally, governance is defined as the *structures and systems of decision-making*. The kinds of structures and

systems that currently govern organizations prioritize rational thinking as the means to making decisions and language proficiency as the means to communicating. These core premises exclude people with developmental disabilities (and others living on the margins) from participating meaningfully in structures and systems of decision-making. While we originally set out to find better models, we eventually turned away from structure first, and towards relationships and desire as the building blocks of (good) governance. While not a scientific revolution, we are pushing for a fundamental shift in how we conceptualize and practice (good) governance.

“Under normal conditions the research scientist is not an innovator but a solver of puzzles, and the puzzles upon which he concentrates are just those which he believes can be both stated and solved within the existing scientific tradition.”¹⁶

In other words, solving the “puzzle” of “good decision-making” within the paradigm of traditional governance limits us to a specific set of answers. This particular set of answers never threatens the mental models, values, and beliefs, which are the foundation of any given dominant paradigm. Traditional mental models around governance command rational faculties of reason as a condition for good decision-making and thereby exclude people with developmental disabilities. If we want our community members to have a real say, we need to step out of the dominant paradigm that defines traditional governance.

¹⁵ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Essential Tension* (Chicago u.a., Il: Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1977), xvii.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 234.



“How might we step out of a paradigm that we’re immersed in? How do we scoop the water we swim in?”

That leaves us asking: How might we step out of a paradigm that we’re immersed in? Or, more figuratively, ‘How do we scoop the water we swim in?’

To pursue different questions, we need to surface the mode of reasoning that determines the kinds of questions asked within a standing paradigm. To get to the bottom of the mode of reasoning within an established paradigm, we need to identify the values and mental models that are driving the most pressing pain points and the most obvious indicators of success within that paradigm. In practical terms, this means asking:

- What are the mental models and values defining what is understood as good governance?
- And, what are the mental models and values behind the particular standpoint that defines problems in governance?

If we intend to surface the mode of reasoning through questions, we need to ask:

- What are the questions that, if answered “correctly,” yield good governance?
- And, which questions help us understand what gets in the way of good governance?

While Kuhn theorizes paradigm shifts as a revolutionary process that replaces one paradigm with another, our experience in the field looked more like a two-step jump. Most of the professionals and practitioners we talked to, and who have experimented with alternative governance models, have taken the governance structures of the old paradigm and improved, tweaked, or reformed them. Some went a step further. That’s where we’d like to head.

The table below gives an approximate overview of the core characteristics that distinguish the old, the reformed, and the shifting paradigm with regards to their idea of good governance.

GOOD GOVERNANCE IS...

Structure first paradigm

- Traditional governance
- Organization-centred
- Organizational survival, stability, and growth are primary goals of governance.

Reformed paradigm

- Purpose-driven governance
- Purpose-centred
- Governance decisions ought to ensure that the mission, values, and vision of an organization are being advanced, ideally in an effective way.

Shifting paradigm

- Un-governance
- Values-centred
- The core function of governance is to actualize values throughout the whole organization, to deconstruct boundaries between different stakeholders, to offer grounds for relationships of reciprocity and respect, and to reconstitute communities.



THE PARADIGMS

The Structure first Paradigm

Within the traditional notion of governance, good governance is measured by “organizational performance indicators” and according to standards of “efficiency and efficacy.” Abstractions like these are removed from context and tend not to ask: efficient at what? To reserve resources for what purpose, and at what cost to the realization of other values? These types of performance indicators put the focus on organizations, not communities. Non-profit organizations and the communities they purport to serve are often assumed to be one in the same. Good governance helps to ensure the survival and growth of the organization, which is often conflated as inherently good for community.

If we define governance as the structure of decision-making and good governance as the assurance of organizational success, then it makes sense why highly-educated professionals tend to be in positions with decision-making power. Beneficiaries & community members might be consulted in quality improvement surveys, but they are responding to questions set by those with more “expertise.” Indeed to qualify as a decision maker, one usually has to present some degree of professional expertise, social capital, and/or be invested in status as part of one’s identity. People like Laurie and Paul, who rarely make decisions on a daily basis because systems, workers, parents, and other authority figures decide for them, are unlikely to qualify as a decision maker, or even be motivated to pursue such positions in the first place. The mix

of structural barriers in the form of professional expertise, internalized ableism, and lack of desire as a result of having been excluded from the very experience of making decisions renders traditional governance exclusionary.

GOOD GOVERNANCE (according to the structure first paradigm)

- a prescribed organizational structure with clear hierarchies and professionalized roles amongst CEO, board, and staff
- fixed communication structures & pre-set procedures regulated through mechanisms like Robert’s Rules
- a focus on high performance, effectiveness, and efficiency with regards to achieving results that advance the organization’s growth and success
- top down decision-making processes
- prioritization of professional expertise and logical reasoning as the basis for decision-making



The Reformed Paradigm

Across the social innovation and nonprofit sector, organizations like Disability Arts Online, Greater Than, and Dreamrider Productions have experimented with alternative governance structures. Their goal? To move away from the focus on organizational success, and to centre organizational purpose instead. For example, Disability Arts Online implemented an 80% representation quota of people with disability on their board. Greater Than moved away from organizational hierarchy and developed a self-managing governance model that reflects and serves purpose. Dreamrider Productions tried to transform the relationship between their CEO Vanessa and the board by introducing a trust-based model of intuitive leadership. The common thread of all these experiments: 'good governance ought to serve organizational purpose'.

While making some headway in including people from a wider pool of identities in decision-making processes, the reformed models of governance are still driven by some of the same values and mental models as traditional governance. From a JEDI perspective, progress shows up as diverse representation at the board room table. In practice, diversity hiring practices focus on racial, gender, and sexual diversity. Class and ability identity markers rarely make the cut beyond fulfilling tokenistic functions. Why? Because to participate in the structures and power dynamics of the board room table in a meaningful way, again, one needs mastery of rational thinking, language, etc. This reliance on reason and rationality as the most valued traits and primary modes of decision-making limit the way people with developmental disabilities

can participate in a meaningful way. Self-organizing governance models like the ones Greater Than, Enspiral, and Loomio use are, in reality, brought to life by a group of racially and gender diverse working professionals. Disability Art Online created co-roles for people with and without disability to share. The question from a design perspective is, who has the final say on the co-design of these shared roles?

GOOD GOVERNANCE (according to the reformed paradigm)

- governance designed to advance organizational purpose
- focus on collaboration and the inclusion of diverse voices - though often within the same professional working class
- participatory decision-making through more representative representatives



The Shifting Paradigm

The question that is driving our shift from how the dominant paradigm conceptualizes 'good governance' is: *How can we disrupt and re-direct flows of power within existing governance models in order to create a space where governance is grounded in freely given relationships of reciprocity and respect across differences?*

The core characteristic of the shifting paradigm is desire as the driving force for governance, decision-making, and relationships. Rather than being construed as a given structure, governance, within the shifting paradigm emerges out of a web of freely given relationships of reciprocity and respect across differences. Governance becomes less of a prescribed set of roles & procedures and more of a space where free self-expression triggers creative impulses and the energy to co-create and connect. The core function of desire-based governance is to bring a community's values to life and to break down boundaries between community members. People's personal stake in the community's mission and resonance with its values become the basis of decision-making. The focus is less on organizational survival and more on what is required to sustain the energy & ethos of the community (which, at times, might be about establishing more order and, at other times, might be about loosening controls).

For Curiko and Soloss, shifting the paradigm in order to do governance differently requires us to get clear on what is driving people's desire to be part of each prototype. For Curiko, it's the ruckus spirit; the

sense of belonging that grows out of a celebration of differences; the wackiness, silliness, and fun of experiences. Any governance model for Curiko must reflect and inhabit this ruckus spirit. For Soloss, it's unleashing one's creativity to spark community care, subvert expert-client dynamics, and surface rather than conceal personal loss. Any governance model for Soloss must be fueled by creativity, connection and deep care -- with plenty of space for emotional & spiritual expression. For both Curiko and Soloss, then, 'good' governance leaves plenty of room for participants to un-govern themselves -- to release themselves from normative expectations & go with the flows of the group.

GOOD GOVERNANCE (according to the shifting paradigm)

- desire as driving force behind engagement, not obligation
- broad-based and diverse stakeholder participation in governance
- continuous, active efforts to subvert dominant power dynamics and establish conditions for community based in reciprocal, respectful relationships
- prioritizes the expression of core values in all group decisions and interactions



THE 2-STEP PARADIGM JUMP

	Structure first Paradigm	Reformed Paradigm	Shifting Paradigm
Structure	Defaults to boards as the primary decision-making structure.	Seeks better, more representative boards & committees.	Structure doesn't lead; there are many opportunities for decision-making in the day-to-day.
Board Membership	Professionals with social capital and perceived competency.	Future professionals including representatives of non-dominant racial, sexual, and gender identities.	Folks who may not yet be motivated to govern.
Basis of Decision-making	Professional expertise is a requirement for decision-making.	Professional expertise including that of representatives of non-dominant racial, sexual, and gender identities.	Having a personal stake in the organization, mission, and values is a requirement for decision-making.
Communication	Communication based on language proficiency —oral and written.	Language-based but democratized through technological tools like Loomio.	Open to nonverbal and non-written ways of expression, using play as a vehicle for communication.



THE 2-STEP PARADIGM JUMP (CONT.)

	Structure first Paradigm	Reformed Paradigm	Shifting Paradigm
Risk Management	Risk is defined in terms of financial and reputational loss.	Risk is defined in terms of mission creep and loss of legitimacy.	Risk is defined in terms of evading capture by dominant systems.
Capacity Building	Staff and board training to boost performance.	Anti-racist training for boards.	In-context support for people without marginalized identities to live into the ruckus. Supportive structure emerging from the ground-up.
Accountability	Flows up to funders and board members.	Flows up to board members, who better represent the diversity of staff and community.	Flows down to current and possible future community members with a desire to contribute and a personal stake in the organization.
Process	The decision-making process is hierarchical and, often, exclusive. Decisions are made by those with positional power.	The decision-making process is more consultative, taking into account community feedback.	The decision-making process is ruckus and generative, with community members taking rotating & emergent roles in ways that feel natural & joyful to them.



THE 2-STEP PARADIGM JUMP (CONT.)

	Structure first Paradigm	Reformed Paradigm	Shifting Paradigm
Organization	Organizational structure tends to replicate existing social order, excludes people on the margins by offering unfavourable conditions to meaningfully participate.	Co-led roles between working professional and marginalized board members. Self-organized structure of working professionals.	Organizational structure emerges from freely given relationships between people with varieties of lived experience, and their desire to engage.
Time commitment	Fixed term length, minimal time commitment, often quarterly.	Fixed term length, regular board meetings in addition to working groups and trainings.	Long-term commitment, no fixed term, many forms of engagement including rotating roles.



About the shifting of paradigms, Kuhn says:

*"The transition from a paradigm in crisis to a new one is far from a cumulative process, one achieved by an extension of the old paradigm. Rather it is a reconstruction of the field from new fundamentals, a reconstruction that changes some of the field's most elementary theoretical generalizations as well as many of its paradigm methods and applications. During the transition period there will be a large but never complete overlap between the problems that can be solved by the old and by the new paradigm. But there will also be a decisive difference in the modes of solution."*¹⁷

In other words, the shifting of paradigms is messy. Any conceptual distinctions, like the ones above, are helpful theoretical tools to situate where we want to take governance in relation to what is already out there. These conceptual distinctions are, however, limited in their ability to grapple with the contradictions and greyness of reality. Many of the examples we found in our research are somewhere in between reform and shift. Even where organizations were dipping their toes into the shifting paradigm, they were not directly translatable to our specific context. And, because the examples we sourced were non-profits and social purpose organizations, they all had to contend with the formalities of boards.

insurance, while keeping nearly all day-to-day decisions (from hiring to strategy) in the hands of team and community members. We have purposively stayed in a structurally murky space so we could try and experiment with the conditions for desire-based governance. The time may come when our prototypes outgrow their founding partnership and we face pressure to spin out as an independent organization. It is our hope that we will have enough learning from our experiments to keep relationships & the ruckus ethos at the forefront, rather than defaulting to standard conceptions of good governance.

In Part II, we share in more detail what it has looked like to prototype the conditions for desire-based governance, giving very specific examples of the interactions we've designed & tested. We do not make the assumption that a will to govern is something a governor walks through the door with. Instead we try to cultivate the capacity to respond to an opportunity for collective governance when it emerges naturally.

Legally, nonprofits are obliged to have a board. For now, both Curiko and Soloss sidestep this requirement. They run as multi-organizational partnerships, with an existing non-profit serving as a backbone administrator, enabling us to fundraise & procure

¹⁷Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Second (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970) 84-85.



sprouting
What
your eye?

Meaningful inclusion is
rooted in relationships of
respect and reciprocity

PART II: PROTOTYPING UN-GOVERNANCE



Introduction

We stayed in learning and researching mode longer than intended. As designers, we recognize that testing ideas rather than talking about them can advance our thinking much faster, checking our biases and other illusions. And yet, week after week, we started new Google docs and Murals, arranging and rearranging our research questions and data. Why? We had two mature prototypes and funders who expected to see us implement some governance structures for scale. Deadlines were looming. And we were growing more and more recalcitrant. Why?

Looking back, we were feeling, before we were expressing, that structure, roles, or even training are not what should lead governance. We were beginning to understand relationships and desires as foundational. In our prototypes we were in relationship with many stakeholders, but we knew there was both perceived and actual hierarchy in those relationships that hampered people from recognizing and following their impulse to co-create. We needed to make opportunities for people to reconsider their identity in the group and put performance worries to the side in favour of getting curious about how else we could operate as a group. This included people who had been on boards before and would likely find business as usual more comfortable, those who identified as employees with a contractual relationship to prototypes rather than as leaders or owners, as well as others, accustomed to the client role, who might initially be repelled by an invitation to be part of governance.

We asked ourselves: how could we test which conditions and interactions might disrupt existing power dynamics and open-up space in which everyone could actively shape the future of a prototype? If not board rooms, rules of order, talk-based deliberations, and leadership by the privileged, then what? And how long would it take to emerge?

The pressure to scale

If a prototype works, the next question that follows is: how are you going to scale it?

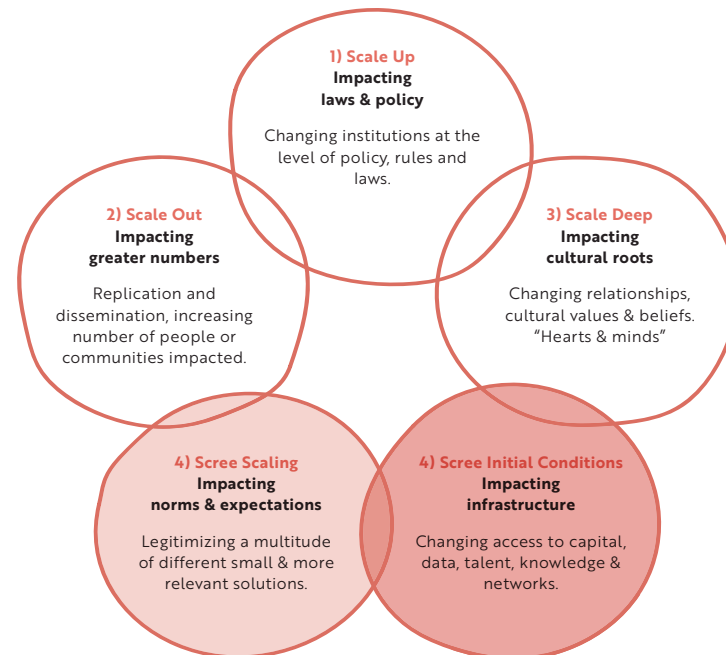
We've long questioned the imperative to scale solutions. In 2018, Gord Tulloch, published a [three-part series](#) on the InWithForward blog, problematizing scale.¹⁸ Tulloch is the Director of Innovation at posAbilities and a treasured partner in thinking and action. Tulloch's series took on the 'entrancement' with scale in the social innovation community, which he described as so pervasive that if an effective solution can't be scaled up or out, it might not be attempted at all. Tulloch adds to the scaling framework proposed by Darcy Riddell and Michele-Lee Moore¹⁹ in an attempt to take the conversation beyond a conception of scale that is limited to volume: increasing the number of people impacted by a solution. Tulloch focuses on Riddell and Moore's third type of scaling, scaling deep, which is about cultural change through the spread of values, beliefs, and logics that run counter to dominant narratives. He adds two more types of scaling that aren't about spreading a particular solution at all: scree-scaling and scaling conditions.

¹⁸ Gord Tulloch, "Problematizing Scale in the Social Sector (I): Expanding Conceptions," web log, InWithForward (blog) (InWithForward, January 30, 2018), <https://www.inwithforward.com/2018/01/expanding-conceptions-scale-within-social-sector/>.

¹⁹ Darcy Riddell and Michele-Lee Moore, "Scaling Out, Scaling Up, Scaling Deep: Advancing Systemic Social Innovation and the Learning Processes to Support It" (Montreal: J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, November 26, 2015).

Scree-scaling is a “conception of scale [that] is less about growing and spreading single solutions and more about legitimizing and cultivating many ‘small’ ones. It represents the view that system change is less likely to occur as a result of a few big ideas than by the accumulation of many little ones.”²⁰ Tulloch likens the value of small social solutions to those of small businesses in the private sector, noting that it is small business that drives the Canadian economy, not big corporations.

Scaling conditions concerns itself with the infrastructure that is needed by innovators to test and grow solutions. In the private sector, Tulloch argues,



²⁰ Gord Tulloch, “Problematizing Scale in the Social Sector (1): Expanding Conceptions.”

²¹ Ibid.

it is understood that “access to capital, data, talent and connectivity (knowledge dissemination and networking)” are essential to the growth of business.²¹ This infrastructure is non-existent or disjointed in the social sector where funds are almost entirely project-based and short term, tied to service delivery targets rather than learning and experimentation. Consequently, non-profit service delivery organizations are machines not built to innovate.

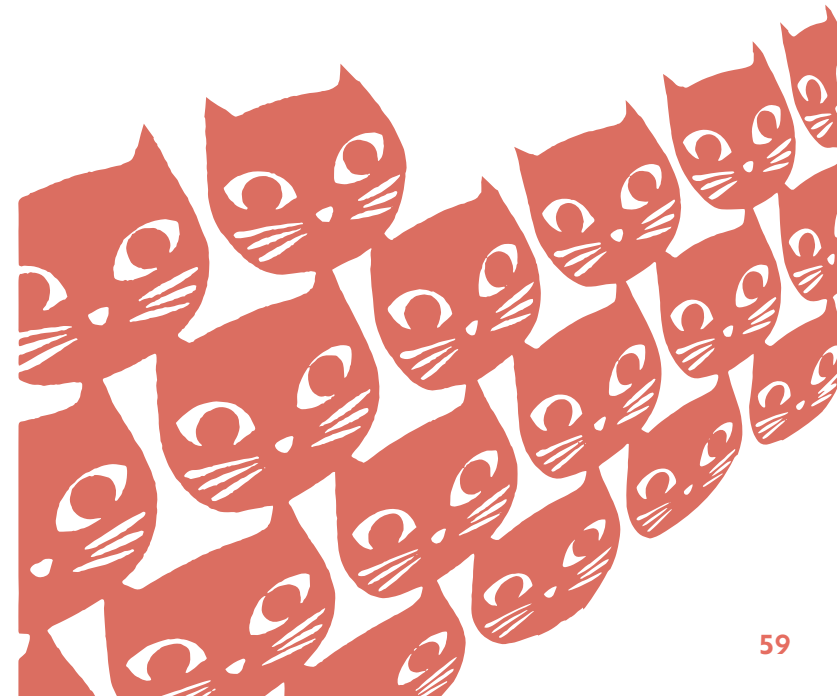
We might think of governance as both a site ripe for innovation as well as infrastructure for innovation. While resources such as tools, training, and procedures for board governance proliferate, there is little infrastructure to support solutions that challenge the underpinnings of the prevailing social contract.

Five years after Tulloch’s blog post, we are only more convinced that an industrial model of scale, in which replicability is the main validation of a solution, is wrong-headed. Designers can package our prototypes’ tools and materials in easily disseminated formats, but they cannot package and disseminate a sense of ownership, belonging, contribution, or one of the most commonly uttered sentiments in our evaluation of prototypes: “it was magic.”

Tulloch gets at this problem in the last of his three blogs on scale: “Because the social sector is deeply relational, the conditions under which solutions emerge are as much part of the intervention as the solution itself, and that this is what gives it legitimacy.” When a solution is developed through a process of ethnographic research and co-design, people are invited in as co-authors of a solution, rather

than simple users. This builds ownership among a community of individuals, rather than a single service providing organization. Tulloch notes: *"The moment the system undertakes to scale a solution that has been birthed under such conditions, it presumes the conceit of ownership and users in new jurisdictions are again relegated to the role of helpees who can enroll if they qualify. Unless there is some sort of adaptation methodology that allows for a transfer of ownership, the solution will belong to the system, not a community of stakeholders."* This is a governance question, as much as an ownership one.

Safe to say that we are wary of the conflation of success with scale. We resist both the dominant logics driving scale but also the vehicles: assuming the structures and burdens that constrain existing non-profits and charities is a sure route to reproducing the power dynamics and other norms of current support models. And yet, to sustain a prototype, true to its intention, it needs some structure and funding or business model, regardless of scale. And in some cases, there is a good argument for an increase in scale. Below, we talk about what it is we would like to grow and spread in two current, mature prototypes.





Introducing two mature prototypes

Curiko

Curiko is a community of people with and without disabilities connecting over shared curiosities & passions. Through an online platform, community members co-create experiences and grow meaningful relationships. Curiko boldly seeks to challenge Western conceptions of personhood rooted in human rationality, self-interest, and productivity. Instead, Curiko sees humans as relational beings seeking connection. Prioritizing connection over rationality and productivity is what makes Curiko kinda radical!

Curiko comes from a collaborative partnership between three disability service providers and InWithForward, and eight years of social research & development to reduce social isolation and loneliness. What people with and without disabilities consistently say they most need—to be seen, respected, understood, and to know they matter--does not easily fit into the way the state funds services. Our welfare state makes authentic connection instrumental to outcomes dictated by our productivity and rationality ideals: things like finishing school, getting a job, being self-sufficient, and gaining the 'life skills' to fit in. And yet, it's the little and big moments—the exhilaration of trying something new, a laugh with a stranger, a spark of mutual appreciation with an acquaintance—which shape how we feel about our lives. After all, a flourishing life is a life where we feel connected to ourselves, to others, and to the world around us. These are the non-instrumental outcomes Curiko has been explicitly designed to contribute to!

2014

Initial research & concept

2015–2016

Partnership formation, co-design & first prototype with 20 people

2017–2019

Second prototype and proof of concept with 100 people/year

2019

First attempt at scale; model did not work

2020–2022

Re-launching platform

2023

Contract to spread across BC



Soloss

Soloss is a network of Edmontonians legitimizing and destigmatizing grief and loss. By bearing witness to loss and giving grief a form—as paintings, objects, songs, dances, meditations, and stories—Soloss seeks to foster a deep sense of meaning, connectedness, and respect.

Loss is life's humbling common denominator. Pandemics and natural disasters remind us that to be human is to be vulnerable; and that vulnerability can connect us, rather than separate us.

Only too often, outside of cataclysmic current events, vulnerability is stigmatized and used to exclude; loss and grief are misunderstood and shunned. That insight is the the red thread from four years of original

ethnographic research with the City of Edmonton's RECOVER Urban Wellbeing team. Colonization, racism, migration, houselessness, economic crisis, and addiction are layered stories of loss, grief and survival. The accumulation of unacknowledged losses, big and small, left nearly everyone we met questioning if they mattered, where they belonged, and how to live with their pain. Yes, the lack of safe housing, income, and accessible food were real stressors. But, what people said they wanted most was respect, purpose and connection.

Soloss has been explicitly co-designed to hold space for grief and loss in ways that grow respect, purpose, and connection.

- **2017**
Initial research
- **2019**
Fourth round of research confirms unacknowledged grief & loss as a common source of chronic crisis
- **2020**
Co-design
- **2021**
First prototype
- **2022**
Second prototype
- **2023**
Third prototype or 'proof of concept'





At the heart of Soloss is a new role called the Losstender. Losstenders are everyday folks—not clinical professionals—with their own lived and living experience of loss, and a creative outlet or somatic healing practice. A growing evidence base shows that when we pause to recognize loss, and mark the moment together, as fellow humans—not as professionals or experts—we can start to bridge class, race and religious divides and lay the groundwork for individual and collective wellbeing.

Really, our goal is to build grassroots capacity to be with and bear witness to loss through freely given relationships. Through such relationships, Soloss makes room for reciprocity, reconciliation, and renewal.

"Restoring relationships and community is central to restoring wellbeing... When we ignore these quintessential dimensions of humanity, we deprive people of ways to heal from trauma and restore their autonomy. Being a patient, rather than a participant in one's healing process, separates suffering people from their community and alienates them from an inner sense of self."

—Bessel van der Kolk

Peer Support



Soloss connects Edmontonians who have come through their own experiences of grief and loss (called Losstenders) to community members in the midst of it (called Sharers) to learn from each other. Circle of Support are healing practitioners who offer debriefing and care to Losstenders.

Expression & Embodiment



Soloss draws on art, body, and breathwork practices to explore healing of the mind, body and spirit.

Local Activations



Soloss organizes local events and ceremonies that bring communities together to honor loss and enable healing.

Individual Healing & Cultural Change

Soloss measures success at an individual and neighbourhood level, including greater sense of respect, connection, and purpose, as a result of shifting the public narrative of grief and loss.



What are we trying to scale?

What evaluation results from both Soloss and Curiko tell us is that their 'magic' cannot be reduced to a replicable formula, and has more to do with making space for our shared humanity. What we are seeking to scale, then, isn't a program, service, technology, or product, but the conditions for freely given, caring relationships between people who might not usually have cause to interact in our socially and economically stratified world. To generate and support such relationships, we need to sow the ground for free association. This starts in the co-design of each role and interaction, and needs to be reflected in non-hierarchical decision-making and decentralized governance.

The connection between Losstenders and Sharers remains the most powerful element of Soloss: relationships are freely given and unencumbered by rigid results-oriented targets and expectations. Losstenders receive an honorarium to help compensate them for the considerable dedication of time to learning; however, we have tried to mitigate against the incentive of money to distort Losstenders' choices around their relationships with Sharers: the honorarium is flat and unaffected by the number of Sharers they engage with. In order to develop and maintain the conditions for freely given relationships, we believe it's crucial to treat the roles of Sharers, Losstenders, and the Circle of Support who surround them, as equals, but we do not want to reduce this equality to money only. Rather, we would like the people in these roles to feel an equal claim to ownership of Soloss, if being part of the Soloss network

and shaping it is something they are drawn to. In other words, we are trying to scale a sense of collective ownership.

In the Curiko community, anyone can host or attend an experience, and we aim to create spaces that welcome people to show up and participate as their full selves. Curiko has, and continues, to develop experiences that support people to grow their self awareness (eg. through coaching or spiritual exploration), relational capacities (eg. learning restorative justice practices at Peace Circle), and political understanding, in support of activism and engagement with the wider world (eg. by meeting other self advocates, learning about legislation that affects them, and joining an outing to a demonstration). These are all crucial aspects of self- and community development to support freely given relationships and to counter dominant experiences that encourage people with disabilities to be passive, agreeable, and complacent, and to relinquish any notions of autonomy or ownership.



What are we seeking to avoid?

Most prototypes (or their more common cousins, pilots) that have experienced Curiko and Soloss' success have a common fate: they become replicable programs. Programs are generally characterized by several or all of the following:

- A preoccupation with achieving a particular set of results, often a requirement of funders
- A prescribed path of activities, usually in the same sequences and at standard intervals
- A relationship between staff and clients that is structured by rules, regulations, protocols and differential access to resources and decision-makers
- A theory of change that sees change as desirable, linearly progressive, and largely the result of staff's actions
- Centralized power (decision-making such as risk management, resource allocation, etc.)

What we're trying & learning

What does it mean to scale culture and the conditions for freely given relationships over programmatic elements like HR processes, learning materials, and backend systems? We thought it might have something to do with treating all of those who are involved in a prototype equally as stakeholders. What would it look like for those accessing support, those offering it, and those who provide mentorship to have complete transparency about the use of resources? What if they were all invited to contribute to those decisions and it was understood that people might move freely between those roles rather than being cast as the type who gets help or the type who gives it? We began to see Soloss operating as a network rather than a program and felt that for people to be interested in opportunities to make decisions, they needed to feel motivated by a sense of ownership and belonging.

With Curiko, after community members with disabilities organically began to take on roles as experience hosts, a role initially played by people without identified disabilities, we happily began to ask what kinds of supports different people might need to consider taking on meaningful roles. From there we have begun to test experiences in which everyone shapes the agenda and makes decisions.

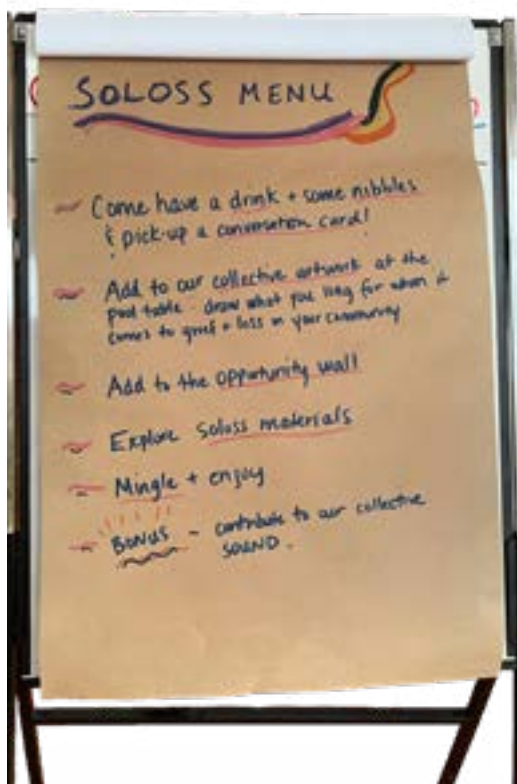
We are in the midst of trying a few experiments to test our ideas and assumptions.

EXPERIMENT ONE

Network Events

Purpose

Our overall purpose is to help us build the Soloss community, and find fresh ways to turn grief & loss into moments of meaningful connection. Within that, we wanted to discover our shared desire, build relationships between people across cohorts, and start to create a shared picture of the future Soloss that is collectively owned.



What we did

The first network event we ran was called Loss & Found and we held it mid-way through our second season of losstending. We decorated a downtown space used by Boyle Street Community Services' Managed Alcohol Program and ordered the wine made by participants. The space was filled with candles and fairy lights, posters that introduced Soloss and its values, principles, and roles, and colourful fabrics as table cloths, to give it a different feel. We provided snacks, had plenty of art materials and invited guests to work on individual and collective drawings using grief & loss prompts. Later in the evening we made sounds together as part of an embodied activity, and invited people to identify opportunities for Soloss. There was also time to mingle and chat.

Who was involved

About 25 attended

- Advertised publicly on Eventbrite
- Soloss Losstenders, Cohorts 1 & 2
- Soloss Losstender applicants, Cohort 2
- Soloss Sharers, Cohorts 1 & 2
- Soloss Sounding Board, Cohorts 1 & 2
- Funders & supporters (City of Edmonton RECOVER team members)

EXPERIMENT ONE

Network events: Loss & Found

Memorable moments

Intergenerational exchange. Young Losstenders and an older member of the Sounding Board were drawn to each other. The older network member commented on how much they appreciated the energy of being around passionate young people.

Making noises. A Losstender invited us to explore sounds we make using different parts of ourselves. Everyone made sounds at once and several commented that it felt unifying and freeing.

Passing the yarn. Standing in circle and passing a ball of yarn as we shared something we appreciated about the receiver gave participants a chance to take the reins. Even strangers were able to find something to share about each other which may have created trust between network members, not just with those of us in facilitation roles.

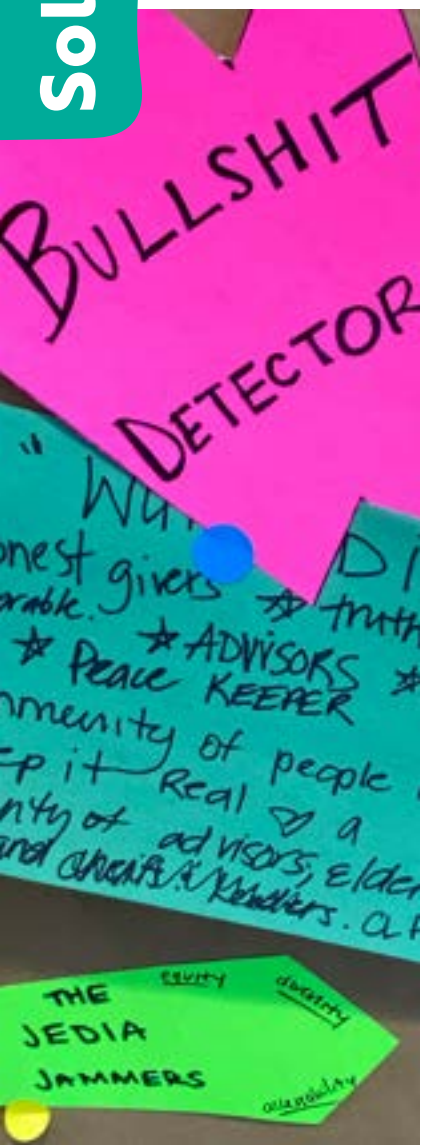
Learning

Common ground. Grief & loss and creativity were enough shared interest to bring strangers and people with very different lived experiences together for the evening.

Do Soloss-y things. While it may be awkward at a gathering to ask people to try making sounds or movements that aren't part of their usual repertoire, we know that creative energy and embodied activities can have a profound impact on people's affect, sense of belonging, and connection to others present.

Behave like a network. Be open and porous, not too controlled. Ask people to share something they value, and be welcoming when new people show up. Have faith in the group's ability to integrate new people and create opportunities for people to understand what we're about, connect, and care.





EXPERIMENT TWO

Remaining in the Fray Workshop Weekends

Purpose

To understand what Soloss had produced for those who had participated in the first prototype, and what might be possible for the future. After spending the fall in a Deleuze & Guattari reading group with Dr. Tim Barlott at the University of Alberta, we were curious about how Soloss could “remain in the fray” without being “captured” or co-opted by the dominant system. We were curious if and how Soloss had opened up space for people to express different parts of themselves, to feel free or less constrained by the norms and expectations of dominant culture (particularly around grief and relationships), to connect with their own creative impulses or desires, and to engage freely with people unlike themselves in a way that produced care and/or joy. And we were curious about other, unanticipated effects that people perceived.

A secondary purpose was to gauge people’s desires for the future of Soloss, including their relationship to it. We wondered if decentralized network governance was viable and appealing.

What we did

We held full day workshops over two consecutive weekends, for a total of four days. We invited participants in Round 1 of Soloss to the first weekend and opened it up to Round 2 participants for the second weekend. The days included a lot of ritual, time for relationship building, making, and role-playing to express what people remembered, and also our fears and hopes for Soloss.

Participants were paid an honorarium made possible through a Killam grant from National Research Council Canada.

Who was involved

Losstenders, Sounding Board members, and Sharers, plus one support worker who came to assist a few Sharers in their participation.

- Dr. Tim Barlott and grad student Erin Tichenor
- The RECOVER team from the City of Edmonton
- The Soloss design team

EXPERIMENT TWO

Remaining in the Fray Workshop Weekends

Memorable Moments

Kyle, the Unicorn. When we invited people to the workshops, we asked them to bring an offering that represented something about them and/or the energy and intention they wished to bring to the workshop. It was left very open and some people carefully selected an item while others improvised on the spot. Kyle, the unicorn, was one such offering. The vibrant color and playful spirit instantly broke the ice, and created a shared reference point for laughter and camaraderie.

Mutiny against Hayley. We introduced a series of scenarios that could threaten (or make) the future of Soloss. Most included some level of threat to Soloss values alongside a chance to grow or transform. We divided into groups that mixed participants from Cohorts 1 & 2 as well as the design team, funders, and researchers and challenged them to develop a skit about how their scenario might play out. One group responded to a prompt in which Hayley, the lead of the Soloss design team, is on a power trip. The way they dramatized the scenario was subtle and eerie as they played out scenes that felt quite familiar adding only a slight twist of intention that showed how easily a practice could become warped, controlling, and oppressive. In their play, Losstenders and Sharers mutinied against Hayley's presumptuous authority. Between bouts of raucous laughter, it sent shivers down the spines of those of who had been making the majority of decisions to date.



Solos



Name that Tune. The participants at the workshops were diverse in many ways, including abilities. Some Sharers attended from a supportive housing community, along with a support worker. It sometimes took quite a bit of work and support to make activities more accessible for everyone present, especially those drawing on memory or conceptual thinking. Participants were welcoming and inclusive, but we noticed that with full days, break times were often the moments when people would retreat into less diverse social groupings, as they tried to restore their energy. We brainstormed some ways to energize and bring joy to the group, without reverting to silos, and landed on a 'name that tune' game. When we started playing a song, we could never get to the opening lyrics before one participant had guessed the song and artist. With sheer glee, he correctly named songs from pop, rock, rap, and country, occasionally pausing, with great effort, to give someone else a win. It was a lovely demonstration of how abilities vary according to context and task. The King of Name that Tune rode high on his saddle into the next day's activities, with a greater sense of group value and belonging.

The Rob Squad. On the last day, we created Soloss roles of the future by building off a list of strengths and threats from the previous day. Participants worked in groups and one group followed the creative impulses of one of its participants, Rob, a Sharer, who had the idea of "The Rob Squad." The Rob Squad "Saves lives" by allowing folks with grief & loss to "talk to someone", "Be yourself," "Believe," and "Be grateful." While open to interpretation, this entity, that behaved like Soloss but was called "The Rob Squad " might have been an expression of Rob's desire to contribute to and extend the care of Soloss. From there, "Rob Squads" proliferated, producing Rob Squad #2, #3, and #4, each tackling a new set of challenges commonly faced by people in Rob's life or perhaps Rob himself: they referenced residential school and cash settlements, marriage and relationship breakdown. In addition to caring for people grappling with these challenges, some other descriptors of the different Rob Squads included: "More live than die. We all have problems," "Give their hearts out to people, share a hug," "Save lives & be a badass." The whole group dedicated themselves to documenting Rob's vision and didn't worry too much about trying to pin down definitions or details. They presented back to the group with uncontained enthusiasm.



Bracelet-making check in. Each morning, we sat in a circle for an opening ritual. We dedicated quite a bit of time to this opportunity to establish a mood, set intentions for the day, express appreciation and leave the mundane world behind. On the last day, we continued with our pattern of each lighting a candle, and we improvised a ritual in which we passed around a ball of yarn and scissors and when each person received it, they would cut off a piece of yarn and use it to tie a bracelet onto the wrist of the person after them in the circle, while expressing some appreciation for the person. From the start, people embraced the ritual, and added to it, asking for the person's consent, preferences for their bracelet, and turning their full attention to them. Intermixed with moments of earnest gratitude were those of innocent candor: one participant who had some trouble following the proceedings stated loudly, more to the person beside him than the group, *"What do I say about her? I don't really know her!"* The person he spoke to said, *"well maybe the group can help you come up with some things. Would you like that?"* He agreed and people piped up with a few thoughtful words as he cut the bracelet for his neighbour. Another participant admitted to the same trouble and he and his neighbour took the moment to get to know each other a bit, spiced with some tongue-in-cheek humour.

A parting request. As the group from supportive housing departed on the last day, one of the members expressed that while he had been unsure about whether to participate, he was hoping to leave with something physical to document his contribution. He explained that without a memory aid, these four days of workshops, which felt important to him, would soon be forgotten. In response to his request, the workshop organizers produced [a zine](#) about the workshops and hand delivered a copy to every participant. It felt meaningful that this participant had been able to voice his need to the whole group, confident it would be received well.

EXPERIMENT TWO

Remaining in the Fray Workshop Weekends

Learning

Ownership ideal. Many present didn't hesitate to express preferences for the future of Soloss, to assign themselves a role in that future, or to play out scenarios in which Losstenders and Sharers took over Soloss in the event of the design team's sudden death. As a group, they warmed to more decentralized structures and anti-hierarchical values. They attributed great value to Soloss, both broadly and personally. However, for many present, it was also true that many of their interactions with Soloss had been paid, and that income was also highly valued by them. Whether interaction with Soloss held intrinsic value needs much more testing before we can say if decentralized, network governance is viable.

Playfulness & candor. Based on how people participated in the Soloss workshops, playfulness and candor appear to be two important ways that we interact with each other. The expression of big feelings, and a capacity for serious moments sits alongside laughter and creativity. Governance activities should probably reflect that spirit of playfulness & candor.

Temporary Autonomous Zones. In diverse groups especially, power dynamics need constant disruption in order not to become entrenched, and in order to engage the creativity and desire of each member of the group. Some of the most memorable moments from the workshops were times when people rubbed up against or flouted unspoken expectations & norms, created space for play and silliness that undermined authority, and spoke with absolute candor. It created spaces where people could assert or act out a sense of ownership over the group or Soloss itself rather than maintaining 'participant' status.



EXPERIMENT THREE

Invitation to Slack Channel

Purpose

To test Soloss network members desire to co-govern the network on a basis of mostly non-monetary exchange, the best formats, and ways to track decisions and participation in decisions in a transparent way.

What we did

We invited all Soloss alumni (Circle of Support Losstenders, and Sharers) to join a Slack channel dedicated to information sharing & decision-making. It started with a poll to find out which of several ways to shape and influence Soloss would appeal to them.

Who was involved

41 people have joined the Slack channel from across all three prototypes - including Losstenders, Sharers, and Circle of Support members.

Memorable Moments

Ritual & Ceremony Kit. At onboarding, each Losstender was gifted a ritual and ceremony kit, which was intended to highlight the importance of ritual, and provide an example of the sorts of things one might use to bring ritual to an encounter with a Sharer. They caught on: Losstenders added to them and the group decided they would make a ritual of leaving stones with every visit. Recognizing the importance of having medicines on them, one Losstender offered to take others to gather them outside the city, and the group

organized a couple of trips over Slack, without any facilitation.

Crowd-sourced communications. Soloss has had opportunities to present at conferences and to city policymakers. Network members volunteered to shape the story. To support, our design team put together a bank of prompts. Members chose, and shared their own thoughts without others' influence. The result was both powerful and reflective of the plurality of experiences with Soloss, rather than a top-down, controlled narrative.

Learning

Keep the hustle. Inviting everyone to a digital platform is a good way to get communication going amongst the network rather than having organizers always be in the lead. But, in our experience, it doesn't take off without lots of curation. There will also always be a handful of people in any truly diverse group who have other communication needs. These people are important! Making a round of phone calls is crucial to maintaining engagement.

Group reflection drives collective action. Regular opportunities for active members to reflect on their experiences with Soloss creates the conditions for people to identify how they are feeling, leading to a clearer sense of what they would like to see more of or less of in future. Doing so as a group can help foster mutual understanding and cohesion that supports transparent and fair decisions and united action.

EXPERIMENT ONE

Puppet Workshops

Purpose

To test how different modes of communication and self-expression can help disrupt default power dynamics between people with and without disabilities. Exploring the world of puppetry, we were set out to test 3 things:

① We all have a version of ourselves that doesn't like to follow the rules or doesn't fit in. A rebel part within us, or maybe even a part we've been told not to show. We call this part our "raucous self." At Curiko, we're all about celebrating differences! All parts of us are welcome. Even more so, we think that our raucous self should have a say when we're making decisions about Curiko. So we want to know: **Can puppets help us connect with the raucous part of ourselves?**

② We all have different ways we like to communicate with others. Some of us prefer signs, some words, some body language, some facial expressions. In spaces where people with power make decisions, words spoken and written are often the only form of communication that is accepted. Who gets to make decisions then often depends on how well people have mastered language. But words are only one way to express ourselves. There are so many other ways! So we want to know: **How might we express ourselves and understand each other in ways other than the usual script? Can puppets help?**

③ Curiko is a platform that invites everyone to create and be part of experiences that matter to them. Our goal is to open-up space for people to joyfully contribute, have a voice, and collectively shape the Curiko community. So we want to know: **Can puppets spark a sense of joy, and help us find new ways of exchanging our perspectives and ideas?**



EXPERIMENT ONE

Puppet Workshops

What we did

We invited Maggie Winston, a professional puppeteer from Montreal, to model how to make expressive puppets. We ran a two-day in-person workshops and a three-day online workshop.

Some workshop highlights:

- **Embodiment exercise:** Introducing ourselves with a random body part
- **Movement exercise:** Bringing out the raucous within each of us as we're moving as a group
- **Breathing:** Bringing a simple paper puppet to life through breathing
- **Learning:** Maggie shared with us a riotous history of puppets around the world
- **Paired share:** Developing our puppet characters
- **Making:** We all made puppets
- **Play:** Bringing our puppets to life



Who was involved

We invited community members, hosts, team members, and funders to join us in the puppet revelry.

Memorable Moments

Ripping the rules. At the beginning of each workshop, we handed out a sheet of paper with our ungovernance rules:

- Anyone can speak out of turn
- Yes to music, moving, getting up, and dancing
- No having to be polite
- No need to stay on topic
- Yes to making mistakes
- Yes to fidgeting, eating, doodling
- Yes to making a ruckus

We read them out together and invited everyone to crumple up the sheet of paper or rip it apart in a symbolic act of resisting top-down rules. Everyone had a blast! It was a celebration. Staying true to our ruckus spirit, one of our community members shouted out "NO!" when asked to rip up the rules. That felt like a win!



EXPERIMENT ONE

Puppet Workshops

Learning

Ruckus spirit. Our community members already bring the ruckus without us having to do much other than create a container to hold it.

Friendship theme. When we paired up to create little plays with our puppets, most of the puppet shows circled around the topic of friendship. Participants were able to express a desire for belonging and connection within the puppet plays.

Collaborative muscle. We learned that collaboration is tricky for some of our community members, who prefer to work solo. If we want to make decisions together, we need to flex that muscle.

Balance the silly and serious. The workshops were chaotic and joyous, and sparked desire for many to further engage in the governance journey. It was, however, quite difficult to strike a balance between the silly and the serious. We did not get to an explicit conversation about power or decision-making with our puppets this first go around.





EXPERIMENT TWO

The Retreat

Purpose

- To cultivate the conditions for participants to develop a personal stake in Curiko's future through an intense, joyful, and trust building experience.
- To create a space for holding the ruckus and non-normative parts of ourselves.
- To build relationships across differences.

Our hunch was that an overnight retreat could set the stage to nurture freely given relationships rooted in shared values and experiences. We wanted to test if a more equal relational basis could grow individual and collective agency for decision-making without needing to revert to institutional governance conventions like Roberts Rules. To do that, we needed to disrupt the helper-helpee and disabled-non-disabled binary that so often dominates shared ("heteronormative") spaces. Building on the lessons from our puppet workshops, we incorporated plenty of somatic exercises and play to unleash our hidden selves. We also used scenarios, metaphors, design prompts, and interactive games to explicitly address power and daylight the tensions of decision-making.



EXPERIMENT TWO

The Retreat

What we did

We organized a three-day retreat at Loon Lake Lodge, and structured the agenda according to Curiko values. The goal was to bring community values to life. Some of the highlights:

Knocking domineering norms down. We ordered a huge Jenga set and decorated each block with an idea or norm. We invited participants to knock down the blocks they wanted to challenge. Examples of norms included prejudice, loneliness, shame, having to hide who you are to fit in, day programs, only paid relationships, unwelcoming spaces.

We are all wonderfully different and equal. We sourced a baby swimming pool and filled it with milk, inviting participants to pour food colouring into the milk to create a beautiful mandala of colours. The idea was to show how differences can co-exist and make something awe-inspiring when they come together. Differences do not need to be overcome or dissolved.

We are only all free when each of us is free of prejudice and oppression. We paired up and each picked out labels that describe how others see us vs how we see ourselves. The exercise surfaced how each of us, regardless of whether we identify as having a disability or not, struggles with prejudice and oppression. What would it be like to show up without our labels? What are the labels we choose and are proud of?

We can all learn and grow. Novelty and discomfort are yummy nutrients for growth. We got into making mode and crafted puppets. Some brought theirs from the workshop, some had not ever made a puppet, and some of us wanted to make another one. We split up in groups and performed short plays using our puppets to express ourselves and solve common challenges that Curiko seeks to address.

Examples of challenges were:

Your puppets are feeling lonely. They'd like to meet some new community members and bring more folks into their puppet community. What do you do?

And they say money doesn't grow on trees! Your puppets are given \$10,000 to build their puppet community. How do they choose to spend it? Who decides?

Your puppets want to go on holiday together, but their parents & staff say it's too risky, it's not feasible, it's too much money. What do your puppets do?

EXPERIMENT TWO

The Retreat

Who was involved

- Curiko members
- Hosts
- Team members
- Government funders

Memorable Moments

Throwing down the system. One of our community members took a Jenga block, threw it across the room, and called out *“down with the government!”* It was powerful and sparked conversation.

Saying no. Rehearsing for their puppet performance, one of our community members used their puppet to tell her paid support worker loud and clear, *“Stop telling me what to do all the time!”*. We can confirm that, yes, puppets are a tool for some to express themselves freely.

The chocolate fountain. In preparation for the retreat, we asked folks to brainstorm what would bring delight and deliciousness. Someone suggested a chocolate fountain. We tracked one down. It was decadent, a little bit ridiculous, and symbolic of a space that celebrates the ruckus and unreasonable.

The soup. We invited all participants to edit the collective agenda at the beginning of each day. One of our members described the exercise as *“making a soup”*. Everyone adds ingredients. The language stuck!





EXPERIMENT TWO

The Retreat

Learning

Games. We gamified many of our agenda items to make them more fun and it worked really well. Instead of talking about ideas that we want to challenge, we build a giant Jenga tower and knocked it down. Instead of giving people conversation prompt cards, we decorated the dinner table with cootie catchers. Instead of announcing our intent to knock down walls of judgment, we put panty hoses on our head with a ball inside and knocked down cup towers for fun. Games sparked people's desire to engage and interact with each other.

Spontaneity and unreasonableness. Having our clown Bella Donna spontaneously join the retreat was a highlight for many participants! She is really great at celebrating being different and freely expressing herself. She inspired others to be courageous. Similarly, the chocolate fountain and colourful mardi gras beads that participants received upon arriving at the retreat site set a celebratory tone and invited people to express themselves freely.

Time. Giving people a full hour to settle in and allowing everyone to take naps and breaks when needed allowed spaciousness for people to participate at their own pace.

Power is sticky. While we made a conscious effort to address power more explicitly this time, we were left wanting more ways to visualize its flow. Concepts of agency, autonomy, and authority did emerge in plays, and yet the way in which power moves through spaces can feel hard to grasp. How might we make power even more visible and contestable?

Facilitation. While parts of the 'soup' (agenda) were co-designed, and evening experiences were self-organized and self-facilitated, we were hungry for more shared facilitation throughout our days. We reflected that whoever took on the facilitator role remained somewhat separate from the rest of the group. At the same time, we recognize desire and capacity to facilitate must be nurtured and grown. Going forward, we can imagine creating more paired facilitative moments.

Differences in stake. The majority of retreat participants were Curiko community members, hosts, and moderators who identify as having a disability, plus the Curiko team, a funder, and a few support staff. And yet, the Curiko community includes hosts & community members who do not identify as having a disability. Because one of our goals is to bridge lines of difference, what else might we try to attract the full range of folks to take part in an un-governance space?



EXPERIMENT THREE

The Pitch Off

Purpose

To test collaborative decision-making in a ruckus (ungovernance) space. The “Pitch Off” was a first in a series of experiences that we are calling “The Summer of Soup,” where we practice making strategic, budgetary, policy, human resourcing, and design decisions together as a Curiko community.

What we were testing:

- Can we make decision-making convivial and joyful?
- How do we stir up desire for being part of decision-making about Curiko’s future?
- What are the necessary conditions for people to feel confident about their ability to participate and contribute?

What we did

We invited community members to give feedback on the next geographic location to scale Curiko. The format was a competitive pitch off with backdrops, props, and costumes. Two team members, who had been researching site options, compiled their findings into an engaging play. Regaling their audience in a hilarious performance of competitive banter, each team member made a case for their respective region to become the next home for Curiko. Community members were invited to ask questions, give feedback, and take part in a pulse check with their top choice.

Who was involved

- Curiko team members
- Community members (hosts, moderators, participants)



EXPERIMENT THREE

The Pitch Off

Memorable Moments

Room for on the spot performances. One of our community members joined the pitch off experience randomly because he saw it on the Curiko platform. "Randomly" meaning he had not been part of any other Curiko governance experience before and had not received a targeted invitation email. He shared his preference for Prince George having traveled there before and expressed a desire of wanting to visit again, this time on his own. He was also very passionate about singing a song for the rest of the group. As a group, we agreed for him to perform the song at the end of the experience, and sure enough, he serenaded us!

Need. After the pitch off, all community members were invited to comment and ask questions. A common thread throughout all contributions was a focus on need. *"Alberta cut services recently. Prince George is close to the border. People with disability in Alberta might need Curiko more."* And, *"There are less services in Northern BC. People with disability up there need Curiko more than people with disability in Kamloops where there are already more services."*

Cats. Fun fact: Prince George has one of the highest feral cat populations in the province. We know that cats are a big hit amongst our community members. Did the cat population's needs sway people to vote for Prince George? We might never know.

Learning

Independent thinkers. The pitch off performances did not determine people's decision-making. The decisive factor for folks was need. Need was not addressed in either presentation of the two regions.

Tension avoided. What would we have done if our community members had voted for Kamloops? Our team, partners, and funders were already leaning towards Prince George. The community feedback confirmed and validated that decision. What would we have done if it opposed it?

Silly & serious. With the pitch off format, we tested if we can make serious decisions in a fun, silly space. The answer: We most definitely can!

Facilitate for balance. In order to balance the ruckus with the serious, we needed someone to orchestrate the experience. There was room for cats and singing without it taking over because a facilitator kept bringing us back to the decision at hand when needed.



EXPERIMENT FOUR Summer of Soup

Purpose

Our goal was to test and practice collective decision-making with everyone and anyone who has a stake in Curiko. We want to constantly be creating spaces where dominant flows of power are disrupted and re-directed. We are calling these spaces "temporary autonomous zones." In the summer of soup series, we set out to learn: What matters to different folks when we make decisions? How do we spark and nurture people's sense of contribution/self efficacy? Why do people show up and how do we continuously broaden who engages?

What we did

Over the summer of 2023, we ran a series of online and in-person experiences where we not only made actual soup, but also made decisions together. The decisions we made in collaboration with our community were in response to these queries:

- What does a community-led hiring process look and feel like? How does community shape the role description, criteria, and interview? (HR decision)
- What ought to be the topic of future coaching sessions on the Curiko platform? (content decision)
- What ought to be our community's no-show policy? As in, what should happen when hosts or participants do not show up to planned experiences? (policy & practice decision)

To explore these questions, we used a blend of art & improv based exercises to spark creativity and play. Participants made marks on a graffiti wall with two sections: what does making a decision versus having a decision made for you feel like? We played games like "pin the horn on the unicorn" and "would you rather" to warm up our decision-making muscles, make visible Curiko values alive, and build confidence that everyone has something to contribute. We then shared a meal of soup together, followed by the making of our metaphorical soup -- where participants chose the best "ingredients" for a Curiko hiring process, coaching sessions. and no show policy.





EXPERIMENT FOUR

Summer of Soup

Who was involved

- Community members incl. hosts & moderators
- Team members
- Funders

Memorable Moments

Being my own boss. We started our first summer of soup experience with a graffiti wall about what it feels like to make decisions versus having decisions made for you. Rosie, one of our community members, added 'Being my own boss' as a response to the first prompt. She asked if she could take the graffiti wall home so she could share it with others in her group home.

Expressing ourselves. Mid-way through one of our summer of soup online experiences, we decided to have a dance party. The idea was to loosen up our muscles, get moving, and to celebrate the decisions we had already made together. Ben, one of our community members, who never turns on his camera or speaks on zoom, unmuted himself and sang along to the song, feeling like he had something important to contribute.

Co-Facilitation. At the end of one of online summer of soups, team members and 3 community members stayed on to share reflections. While we succeeded in making decisions with the Curiko spirit, we hadn't quite figured out how to rotate facilitation. While co-facilitation remains an ongoing challenge, many community members have expressed a desire to learn.

Learning

Communication. When we create ruckus and fun conditions and prioritize a variety of ways of expression, we can bring a diverse group of folks together to make a decision. As soon as conversation takes over as the dominant way of expression, we lose folks.

Prompts. When we ask open ended questions such as "what are the qualities of a good moderator coordinator" or "What should be our next coaching topics?" without providing projective prompts that help us think outside of what we already know, people regurgitate what they already know.

Don't say it, feel it. When we are asking our community to give feedback on a Curiko matter, like coaching or the moderator coordinator role, explaining what it is or does in words isn't very effective. We need to re-create the experience and the vibe of something first before asking for people to decide on it.



So, what kind of governance might enable us to spread moments & values?

Looking across all of our experiments with collective decision-making, we found ourselves returning to some core ideas and interactions. Here are the nine governance principles and 17 practices we see promise in amplifying:

Principles

- ① **We are building communities rooted in belonging, purpose, and connection, not obligation, expertise, and status.**
In order for freely given relationships to emerge, positional power, or money and other material concerns cannot play an out-sized role, distorting people's life-giving incentives to take part. Honoraria or other material offers are tools to decrease barriers to participation rather than motivate participation.
- ② **We seek out and welcome difference, dissent, and disruption** of status quo practices, power dynamics, and logics as a catalyst for transformative social change, and a protective factor against capture by the dominant system.

Practices

Lead with the non-material. Every interaction with Soloss and Curiko offers opportunities for belonging, purpose, or connection, rather than relying on extrinsic incentives. Where the ask requires significant investment of time, we offer honorarium and/or engage in participatory budgeting.

Know our network members. We maintain an awareness of some of people's needs and desires by hosting events, connecting 1:1 in person, jumping on the phone to check-in, etc. and speaking candidly about what matters.

Inviting the disruption. Greeting interruptions with curiosity: asking, do they mess with the social patterns and routines that maintain hierarchical power dynamics? It's not always clear at first so we err on the side of engaging.

Planned and spontaneous shake-ups. Doing things to create a culture that is inviting, inspiration-seeking, and allows on-the-spot flexibility. For example, having an impromptu dance party and using improvisational games to shift norms like where people sit and who they talk to.



Principles

Practices

- ③ **We stoke desire and reject practices of domination, authoritarianism, and institutionalisation** because we have a hunch that the desire to contribute to governance will emerge organically if people have both freedom and connection.
- ④ **Radical transparency creates conditions for meaningful and healthy community relations and is foundational to decentralized governance.** Transparent practices can develop higher expectations of accountability and help people identify their needs and preferences.

We play! Play isn't a distraction; we use it as a way to access what's in our hearts, work through our fears and build relationships. Play disrupts us in a way that opens up possibilities for new thoughts and behaviours.

Foster people's sense of influence, delightfully
For the masses of people not confident about, or driven to, the prospect of taking part in governance, we can create positive feedback loops by seizing on the offerings they make and nurturing them to turn into something wonderful.

Decision log. The first step is to track the decisions that get made, even if they are not participatory, so that we are training our awareness. When we share when and how decisions have been made, we invite community members to hold us accountable.

Journey maps. We're making processes, decision points, criteria and decision makers explicit in advance so people can decide if it's a process they want to be part of and how to participate to best advantage.



Principles



Practices

- ⑤ **Collective values and principles should shape every community interaction.** Governance functions must mingle with playfulness, creative practice, rituals for emotional expression, and embodied practice.
- ⑥ **A right to influence decisions that directly affect us is only meaningful if we can gain the necessary capabilities.** It is incumbent upon the community to create opportunities and foster motivation and skills to connect with others, identify and explore preferences, desires, and concerns, and feel seen and heard.

The business of ritual... Community gatherings are built on rituals that embed our values and help us make meaning of the everyday tasks and interactions that are also part of our collective.

Make time to explore the meaning and application of collective values. We cannot assume that abstract words like “learning”, “freedom”, or “equality” mean the same things to everyone. Interpreting how these values show up in our own contexts is also important to developing governance capabilities.

Opportunities, everywhere. Governance capabilities start with self-governance and the opportunity to be supported to make autonomous choices and have them respected. Small acts matter.

Creating roles with reciprocity & mobility. We break down helper/helpee binaries and create opportunities for people to move between different roles, with different kinds and amounts of responsibility, expanding their skills, relationships, and sense of identity.



Principles

7

We engage all parts of ourselves to access all of our wisdom. We never reduce communication or participation to talk because we know that our bodies and our senses are sources of information, provide powerful ways to connect, and can help us tether our minds to a sense of purpose.

Practices

Avoid re-creating board rooms. Settings communicate expectations, so we mostly avoid arrangements and decor that suggest formality, lectures, or that the main activity is talking. We want to make it easy for people to move around according to their needs.

Example:

Our Curiko governance retreat was held at a camp with log house cabins, a lake for swimming, and open spaces for creative and physical pursuits. Soloss network events are held in community-led spaces where we can set-up conversational circles, areas for art-making, music, and more.

Introduce novel ways to connect to our bodies and each other with intention, and return to favourites.

These can be very simple gestures and movements we add to our repertoire of communication; concepts, like locating emotions in the body, or extended practices like breath work.

Example:

The Curiko community includes people with varying degrees of verbal communication so we are experimenting with different ways to communicate online. We are trying physical movements, like moving closer to your camera if you are in agreement/interested or further away if you disagree/are uninterested, as well as making our own custom emojis to share in the chat. Ensuring everyone has ways to show support and appreciation for others, or express one's own needs during online experiences, helps us live out our core values.



Principles

Practices

⑧ **Process & relationships eat structure for breakfast.** While non-profits typically focus on structure (a board) and an old script (say, Robert's Rules), it's a culture of trust, interdependence, feeling seen and heard, and freedom of expression that set the stage for brave and responsive self-governance.

⑨ **We need time and patience.** Inclusive, participatory, grassroots governance is a slower, longer game than maybe any funder is prepared for. It's the antithesis of how we usually talk about innovation -- rapid prototyping, startups mushrooming over night, etc.

Begin and end with bespoke rituals. With an awareness of the values and shared purpose of a group, create opening and closing rituals that centre those values and respond to the needs of the group. Whether it be ruckus games, or lighting candles and setting intentions, give people a way to shed the outside world and step into a distinct space.

Bottom-up culture building. Leave spaces for group improvisation and be willing to abandon plans to pursue an idea or behaviour from the group. Demonstrate that culture is co-created and each person has the ability and power to shape culture.

Building a rewarding habit. We are building our group decision-making muscles, which takes repetition and motivation, so we measure our success by whether there are disruptions to usual flows of power; if people are having fun, laughing, and we're sparking desire to participate in governance; we are bringing our values to life; and we are learning something new about how to make collective decisions.

Example:

The Summer of Soup series with Curiko (see page 82) opened-up space for interested community members to make decisions. Decision-making about hiring, budgeting, and programming was not simply left to staff or a board. We are now making these gatherings part of our regular rhythm. Some decisions are less consequential than others, but create opportunities for people to try out different styles of decision-making, see their influence at work, and feel part of something.

PART III: WHERE TO NEXT?



Where to next?

For now, we've sidestepped the structure question, and opted for roles and process first. This is very much aligned with the work of Indigenous scholars like Tyson Yunkaporta. His words remind us that wise governance is not a formula, it's about the capacity to learn over time and implement learning. It is not about generating a state of consensus, let alone group-think or hive mind, but about supporting autonomy and being nourished by the diverse intelligence that autonomous actors bring to a system.

We are in the sometimes slow and non-linear process of learning how to be heterarchical, or "composed of equal parts interacting with each other." We are learning a new dance - increasing our tolerance of a little chaos, and the unfamiliarity of anarchy, while questioning our reactions to the "strange attractors", those who knowingly or unknowingly sabotage our sense of order. For most of us, if not all of us, acting as equals is an education we never received; an education in profound respect for others and ourselves.

This is the goal, but it's also the foundation for the way we want to be, and govern together. We experience glimmers of this heterarchical, deeply respectful community all the time, and we also get stuck, have little tantrums, feel uneasy and anxious, miss the point. We are inconsistent as only humans can be, but still, there is a sense of movement.

We leave you with the words of Tyson Yunkaporta:

"Community members, like bonds, birds, fish, or nodes, need to operate autonomously under three or four basic rules, self-organizing within groups, spaces, and data sets to form complex learning communities. The patterns and innovations emerging from these ecosystems of practice are startling and transformative and cannot be designed or maintained by a single manager or external authority. They cannot even be imagined outside of a community operating this way.

This is the perspective you need to be a custodian rather than owner of lands, communities, or knowledge. It demands the relinquishing of artificial power and control, immersion in the astounding patterns of creation that only emerge through the free movement of all agents and elements within a system. This implicates the way we are managed and governed...

Systems are heterarchical – composed of equal parts interacting together. Imposing a hierarchical model of top-down control can only destroy them. Healthy interventions can only be made by free agents within a complex system – agents referred to in chaos theory as 'strange attractors.' Could you be a strange attractor within your institution? It's a risky endeavor in a culture that attaches negative meanings to words like 'chaos' and 'anarchy.' Equating them with disorder and ruin. But chaos in reality has a structure that produces innovation, and 'anarchy' simply means 'no boss.' Could it be possible to have structure without bosses?"²²



²² Yunkaporta, Tyson. *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*. New York, New York, HarperOne, an imprint of HarperCollins Publications, 2020.

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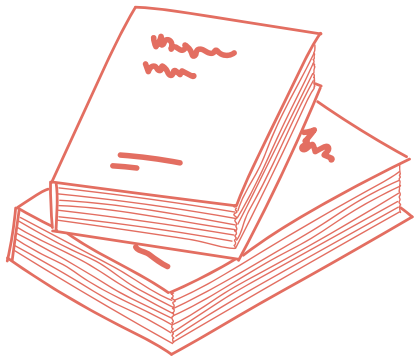
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We humbly co-create from the ancestral and unceded (stolen) territories of the Coast Salish people: home to the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Stó:lō and Selílwataʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh), and xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) Nations. We acknowledge that White supremacist logics — starting with the Doctrine of Discovery in 1455, which legitimized the expropriation and erasure of Indigenous lands and ways of life — are deeply encoded in our institutions and interactions, which we recognize we are a part of, and seek to unlearn & dismantle.