

Mission statement is key to board governance

The mission statement is key to an organization's understanding of its role, says Don Watson, vice-chairman of the board of OACRS (Ontario Association of Children's Rehabilitation Services).

The OACRS board has adopted a new mission statement as part of a restructuring of the board and governance.

"Your top policy is your mission statement," says Watson who has served on "15 or 16" boards and chaired the committee that developed the OACRS mission statement and streamlining of governance.

"If you don't have a clear mission statement, you are not going anywhere," says Watson who has written a book on governance. "Everything else, regarding policies and procedures is subservient to this."

Watson is also a member of the board of George Jeffrey Children's Centre in North Bay.

The OACRS board hired a consultant and took a long time on the development of a new mission statement, he says. OACRS is a complex structure funded almost entirely by the 20 Children's Treatment Centres.

The mission statement, however, does not state that OACRS is the voice of the CTCs, he points out.

"We are a strong provincial voice influencing policy, programs and funding to maximize the potential for all children, youth and families who have physical, communication or developmental challenges best met through a Children's Treatment Centre," is the mission statement developed by the board.

That statement helps board members to focus on the job at hand, Watson points out.

“We are a leadership organization but with no power because we do not control our funding,” he says. “We have to persuade people to do things.”

The restructuring of governance and makeup of the board was necessary because “the structure sort of got twisted over the years and didn’t clearly separate the functions of the board and CEO,” he says. “The board and committees were often wasting the CEO’s time.”

The new procedures clarify and separate the functions of the board, committees and CEO, he says. A new set of committees was established with very clear responsibilities and a new set of bylaws adopted. “It seems to have made a lot of difference and everyone is satisfied we now have a nice clean organization,” Watson says.

OACRS is a complex structure with each of the CTCs having a CEO and board and the CEOs meeting as a group. Another factor to consider was the fact that the CTC boards had no interest in OACRS, he says.

The OACRS board decided to change the makeup of the board to better represent its members, with each CTC board choosing one board member, staff person, volunteer or family member to sit on the OACRS board.

“This year we have a good mix as many of the board members are also family members and the board is able to better discuss the issues.”

Watson said he generally tends to be against large boards because discussions can drag on but there are advantages in having all the CTCs represented. “I am against establishing executive committees because decisions are often made there and that is not fair to the rest of the board.”

The OACRS procedures include the ability of the board to establish an executive task force but the board must feel comfortable activating an executive task force whose role is limited, he says. Small task forces can be set up to do specific, small jobs and the CEO can establish and direct small working groups.

The board is now working on making an addition to board procedures to further involve family members in board planning. “We want all family members to have the opportunity to contribute to the planning,” Watson says.