

Island Caretakers



An award-winning board shares its best practices.
Chief among them: Consensus decision making.

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With stunning shorelines, sparkling blue waters, deep green forests, and resident pods of Orca whales, Orcas Island — located 85 miles north of Seattle, Washington, and a one-hour ferry ride from the mainland — is often called “the gem of the San Juans” by those who are lucky enough to live and vacation there. But like many world-class travel destinations, Orcas Island is becoming a prohibitively expensive place to call home for its local wage-earners. This is where the OPAL Community Land Trust comes in. It is working hard to maintain the character, vibrancy, and economic diversity of the Orcas Island community by acquiring land and creating permanently affordable housing. It is making it possible for people who are essential to the island community’s well-being — teachers, shopkeepers, construction workers, and EMTs, for example — to own a home despite the island’s high property values and their relatively low incomes.

Founded in 1989, OPAL (Of People And Land) was one of the first community land trusts in the American West and remains at the forefront of perpetually affordable housing. In September 2012, it received a Prudential Leadership Award for Exceptional Nonprofit Boards to honor the transformative work its board has done to position the organization for continued success in difficult economic times. The award was presented at BoardSource’s annual conference, the BoardSource Leadership Forum.

What accounts for the OPAL board’s success and what can other boards take away from it to apply to their own governance practices? Lisa Byers, executive director, shares her insights here:

Consensus decision making. Every decision the OPAL board makes is by consensus. As stated in our bylaws, this assumes ‘that we are all trustworthy, that we are all equal, and that each of us has part of the truth and none has all of it.’ This principle is particularly powerful on a board where one-third of our board members represent the low-income community — people who generally have a history of not being or feeling heard in decision making.

Consensus demands inclusiveness and deep listening. The board chair and I plan ahead so that significant issues can be discussed at several consecutive board meetings. At the first discussion, the issue is laid out, and we then go around the table to ask each person to articulate his or her thinking.

Sometimes, it is then clear that we have reached consensus. If not, we hold the discussion over and send the issue back to the relevant committee for collecting more information and further shaping. We do this until either a consensus is reached or, more rarely, the dissenter(s) blocks or abstains to vote. The model works, and it creates a terrific sense of shared commitment.

Inclusive decision making. When faced with really major decisions, we go beyond the board for further input. For example, we were in the middle of a project when the Great Recession hit. To finish the project, we needed to take on significant debt. The board and I prepared an analysis of the pros and cons and reached a preliminary consensus. We then convened a group of long-time supporters — our “Council of Elders” — which includes several retired business leaders, and asked for their advice. When they agreed with our preliminary consensus — that we should take on debt — we arranged to borrow the needed dollars from two other local nonprofits that had funds they wished to invest. It was a win-win situation.

A scenario-based long-range plan. Both consensus and inclusive decision making are part of the board’s long-range plan for 2009 through 2020. The plan analyzed the future need for affordable housing in our community and considered what it would take (business and funding models) for OPAL to meet that need. When developing the plan, we also invited input from our Council of Elders. Knowing that we could never predict the future precisely, we advanced three scenarios: a baseline, a target, and an optimistic — each making different assumptions about future conditions and responses by OPAL. When the Great Recession began, our scenario planning gave us a path forward in the new financial realities. In 2012, three years after adopting the plan, our board revisited the plan’s assumptions and tracked changes in data to evaluate if a change in direction was warranted. The members determined that the plan continued to provide sound guidance.

A nimble but resolute approach. Faced with a straitened economy, the OPAL board has had to be nimble, seizing opportunities for growth when they appear while remaining resolute in adherence to OPAL’s core mission. For example, although the recession depressed financial contributions, several families offered to donate existing

houses to OPAL if we could move these houses from their original sites. OPAL had ‘banked’ land for future construction on which we could place these donated houses, but this meant a shift in our thinking about the use of that land. After careful consideration, we concluded that this was our best option for growth given the existing conditions. The board’s building committee inspected each prospective donated house, turning down several, and estimated the cost of bringing them up to OPAL standards for energy efficiency and sustainability. With consensus, the board then tackled complex cash-flow problems to cover the cost and decided to move ahead. We then successfully used the occasion of these gifts to focus our fundraising on this intriguing new project.

Rethinking fundraising. In response to the economic downturn, OPAL also modified its typical fundraising strategy, which has always involved annual one-on-one ‘ask’ meetings with each major donor or prospective donor. We chose, instead, to invite groups of our major donors and some of our steady-but-less-major donors to ‘gatherings’ at which we update them on our progress but also invite their input on organizational issues. These gatherings have been highly successful, generating not only generous donations but, equally important, good ideas and an increase in everyone’s sense of ownership of the organization. Staff and board members who participate are energized and reminded of why our work is important.

Consensus decision making in action – additional tips from Lisa Byers

- OPAL invites individuals interested in serving on our board to come to a number of board meetings and work on committees before joining the board so they can see consensus decision making in action. I also provide coaching to new board members about how it works and why we practice it. The Orcas Island community has a wide range of life experiences. It’s not uncommon for our board to have a member who was the CFO or COO of a Fortune 100 company or a retired university professor and author of an award-winning textbook now in its 23rd edition. We’ve got folks with that level of achievement, and then we’ve got people who are lifelong teachers or artists or nurses whose livelihoods are not rewarded economically and who aren’t necessarily experienced in boardroom settings or group decision making. So I provide different kinds of coaching. All new members also have mentors their first year, someone they can talk to and ask questions of.
- Part of any good decision making is good preparation. It’s my responsibility as executive director to make sure that I have written a comprehensive narrative for the board that explains the issues before us, how they evolved, the analysis we’ve taken, and the various pros and cons of different approaches.
- If possible, I include a recommendation of how we should proceed. Sometimes, however, an issue is not mature enough for me as a staff member to give a single recommendation, so I present some options.
- Consensus works smoothly when you can craft a specific question to be answered. Most decisions have way stations along the way. What’s the appropriate question to be asking at this particular way station? It might be: Do we have enough information? If not, what do we need? Have we engaged enough individuals in analyzing the various perspectives on this issue?
- When the board gets to a place where there appears to be a decision of substance, the chair goes around the table. It starts as a kind of straw vote: Where are you on this decision? The chair then asks every member to speak; they expect that, though they do have the option to pass. The chair also is responsible for making sure that there is some level of equanimity in the amount of air time given to each member. In our experience, going around the circle once or twice results in a collective shaping of an answer to the question – an answer that may be different from the original recommendation or hypothesis but that includes everyone’s perspective in the final resolution.