

**Participative democracy in municipal governance: Managing politics and navigating change**

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**Abstract:**

As one part of a larger project exploring participative democratic forms of municipal governance, this paper will report an organizational intervention designed to create a more collaborative, participative democratic city management. A Directors Working Conference (DWC) designed to empower city managers is examined through a series of follow-up interviews with participating managers. A total of 10 interviews were conducted, transcribed and coded to synthesize the most common themes. Included is a discussion of the external and internal challenges facing city managers in the current, turbulent socio-ecological environment.

**Key Words:** Participative Democracy, Strategic Planning, Organization Design, Open Systems Theory, Municipalities

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**Participative democracy in municipal governance:  
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City managers live in the midst of a challenging political system with diverse interests. These diverse interests include those of citizens, politicians, municipal executives, employees and union leaders. Our Canadian political system, parliamentary democracy, is designed to provide checks and balances to these contending interests. Yet the democratic ideals of dialogue and deliberation can become fraught with the divisiveness of narrowing and competing interests. The people who manage our cities are responsible for implementing the policies, projects, programs and budgets determined by this political system. In this way city managers (along with all of us, as the end users of public services) are at the receiving end of the relative effectiveness of public governance.

As action researchers and consultants to an Ontario municipality, we are beginning to appreciate the substantial challenges that city managers face today. Our political system and its operational arm, the bureaucracy, are having trouble adapting to our rapidly changing world. As one part of a larger project exploring participative democratic forms of municipal governance, this paper will report an organizational intervention designed to create a more collaborative, participative democratic city management.

While being a city manager is a good job with plenty of perks, people are rarely happy with the efforts of city management. Due to the public nature of their work city managers receive ongoing pressure from many sides. As illustrated in Fig. 1 city managers have two direct bosses, their municipal executives and the elected representatives of city council. In addition to the standard roles of managing their own staff and

**Fig 1.** City managers receive ongoing pressure from many sides



negotiating with unions, city managers are also openly accountable to the general public. This is all while under the constant attention of the local media's watchful eye. These many pressures make for a task environment that discourages risk-taking while expecting extraordinary feats of compromise. This high-pressure/low-risk taking environment makes leadership and long-term planning

almost impossible and is becoming increasingly unsustainable in a world getting faster, more complex and unpredictable.

**Adapting to continuous change**

As citizens and politicians need to continuously negotiate the effectiveness of our public governance system, city managers have a role to play in working together to navigate the ever-changing waters of policies, priorities and public interest. As our society faces more and more change (globalization, climate change, economic volatility, migrating cultures and populations, shifting social values) the role of a city manager is also increasingly about managing the changes emerging in public governance.

It is within this context that our team of Concordia action researchers was invited by the city's Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to engage city management and staff in navigating their increasingly turbulent environment. Rooted in the practice of Open Systems Theory developed by social scientists, [Fred Emery](#) and Merrelyn Emery, we took as a starting point the image of the city as a complex system open to its environment (Fig. 2). The city as a municipal corporation



**Fig. 2** Municipal Corporation as an Open System

is constantly being influenced by and influencing people and events in the surrounding environment. This includes, but is not limited to, local citizens, public interest groups, businesses, provincial and federal governments, and the larger global context. In order to do its job of providing essential public services, the city must adapt to ongoing changes in its complex and multiple contexts. From this perspective the most direct way of actively adapting to change is through a) empowering employees to provide reliable, responsive services and b) engaging citizens in taking responsibility for their community. In other words, in order to respond to a fast changing environment, people need to be able to directly and meaningfully affect the world around them.

**Participative Democracy in the Workplace**

The practice of Participative Democracy (PD) is based on the notion that not only do people have the

right to be involved in the decisions that affect them; they have a psychological need to be involved (Emery, 1999). The principles, notions and values of PD are embedded in an organizational charter crafted by the city Executive Team, one part of which is re-produced below:

*We believe that a successful change initiative must, by design, transform our organization from a bureaucratic, top-down structure to a more participative democratic workplace... In a participative democratic organization, the responsibility for co-ordination and control of work is done by the people who perform the work. When people are involved and are provided with the skills and tools to respond and adapt to changing service delivery challenges, both quality and productivity will increase. At the same time, the quality of working life for all employees will improve.*

Implementing the charter meant that these words needed to be made real by the City's Managing Directors who would be responsible for engaging with employees in creating a participative democratic workplace. Twenty-five Directors were brought together for a 4-day 'Directors Working Conference' (DWC) to consider the implications of PD in the workplace and to develop common goals and strategies towards implementing PD in their organization.

The DWC was the first time that managing Directors were being asked to work together as group. Many city managers and staff commented that it would be impossible for this group to work together, citing departmental rivalries, endemic conflicts, mistrust and miscommunication. With these concerns in mind, our Concordia action research team created a temporary learning/planning environment in which Directors could use their common challenges and opportunities as potentials for collaboration. Our assumption was that given the time and space for collective reflection, the Directors would become more aware of the fact that they share many of the same responsibilities and interests at work. By this we mean that in addition to their normal individual management responsibilities, they have a group life and a group task, and that this awareness could help build an ongoing collaborative framework for the Directors to work as a group with shared responsibilities and interests.

### **The Directors Working Conference**

The working conference was designed as an immersive experience in a participative democratic organization. The model was adapted from the Working Conference Design developed at the Tavistock Institute by Harold Bridger and colleagues (Bridger, 2001). All twenty-five Directors were responsible for the final product to be delivered at the end of the week in the form of: 1) a document outlining change strategies that will meet corporate objectives and 2) a document enhancing team effectiveness competencies and leading

and managing change. Work was done through several group processes;

- Self-Managing Groups (SMG) of 7-8 Directors whose task was to explore personal work situations and select some central issues shared in common.
- Consulting Groups triads consisting of one member from each SMG enabled each member to give and receive consultation from one another on their roles as participants in their self-managed work group and as leaders in their Director positions.
- Town Hall meetings bringing all Directors together to introduce concepts and skills, have large group reflections and dialogue, and collaborative planning and decision-making.

The authors of this article acted as process managers for the working conference providing the overall structure, introducing concepts, and setting tasks.

### **'The Borg of Directors'**

To give an indication of the impact of the Directors Working Conference as a tool for collaborative engagement, let us paint a picture from the final day. The Directors had been working in small groups most of the week to explore their common work situations and to come out with strategies to improve their organization's effectiveness. The last day was spent pulling together the various strategies of the small groups and agreeing on a final, community product. Half-way through the busy last day, a group of Directors announced a surprise. They shuffled in a big cardboard box and pulled out T-shirts for all. The front read, 'Borg of Directors'. They explained that the [Borg](#) is a sort of pseudo-race of cyborgs from the TV show 'Star Trek', which functions as one vast collective intelligence shared by all members who act individually to achieve their common goals. The back of the shirts carried the Borg's famous catch-phrase, "resistance is futile". For them, the 'Borg of Directors' was a bold statement about the power of Director's working together as a whole and implementing their right to manage. Although they had only just begun to recognize it, they had temporarily become a powerful sub-system able to take leadership to pro-actively lead organization change. At the end of the day the 'Borg of Directors' had agreed on the following goals:

- Implementing the right to manage by creating new collaborative relations with Municipal Executives, the Mayor and City Council, Unions and all City Staff.
- Developing and implementing policies as a group.
- Planning and budgeting together for the city as a whole.
- Improving trust & effectiveness by engaging staff in creating a Participative Democratic workplace

The Directors agreed that the city would be much more effective if they worked together as a group to manage internal and external relations, develop common policies, plan and budget, and engage staff directly in improving their own work. From the DWC it was decided to

formalize a Directors Working Group (DWG) to continue to meet and pursue their goals. While this new way of working together would present its own challenges, it also seemed to reflect a kind of common sense.

**Need for support from the environment**

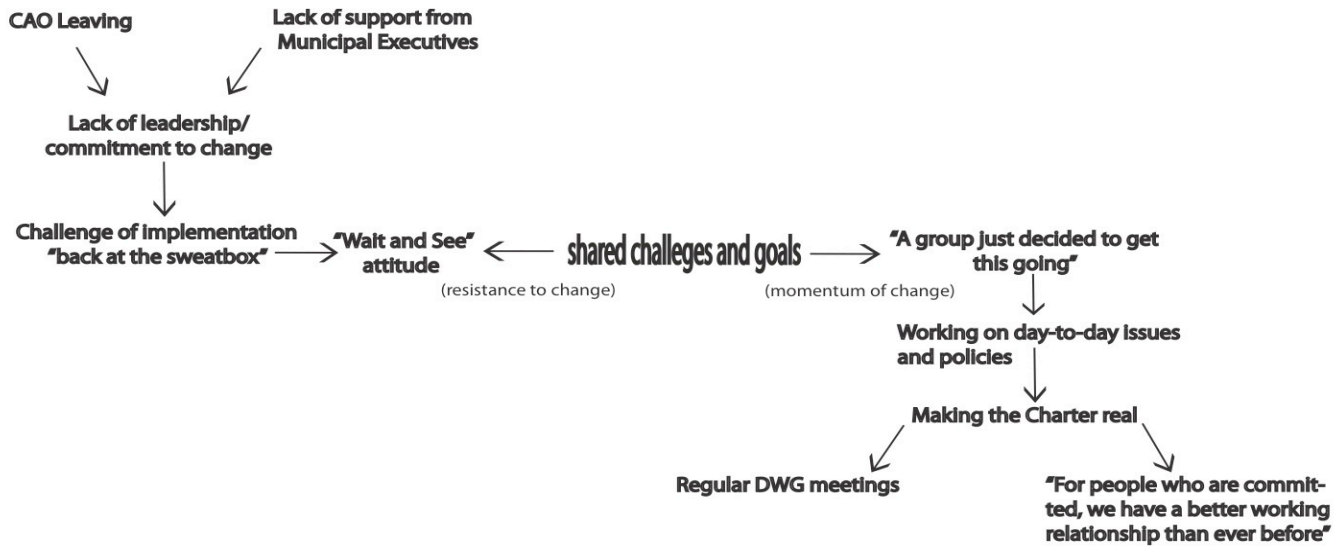
The DWC as a temporary work organization fostered collaboration amongst managers who previously had little opportunity to work together. It created a new group with shared goals and a new platform for working together as management. Yet when most Directors got back to their offices the challenges of day-to-day work seemed to upstage the goals of the Directors Working Group. The DWG’s plan to meet regularly once a month for follow-up was not supported by Municipal Executives, even though these same Executives had sanctioned the development of the DWG. While lack of time was the superficial excuse, the action research team guessed that the real issue was power. No one really expected the Directors to be able to overcome their differences and form a powerful leadership group. But they did and thus created a new power dynamic in

**Impact of the DWC**

From the outside, as external researchers, we could not know what was really going on within the DWG. In order to learn more we arranged a series of follow-up interviews with interested Directors to evaluate the impact of the DWC, the victories and challenges of implementation, and the next steps needed to keep it working. A total of 10 interviews were conducted, transcribed and coded to synthesize the most common themes (Fig 4).

One of the most common statements made by Directors in follow-up interviews was that while Directors agreed with the principles, notions and values of PD, they needed to know more about how to implement them. As a group they struggled to implement their goals and make the time to work together as a whole. While as action researchers we had seen this as the next step, these challenges were magnified by the loss of the City Administrator (CAO) who had initiated the Organizational Charter and DWC (The CAO took an opportunity to work with another city). Yet, as one of the interviewee’s mentioned, if the Directors decided to work

**Fig. 4** Themes from Directors responses to impact of DWC



the organization.

Over the next few months the regular meetings of the DWG became increasingly tentative. The dramatic statements of the ‘Borg of Directors’ to challenge their Executive bosses and City Council were tempered by polite meetings and reservations about “change”. While the DWG appeared to continue to inch along, the action research team became increasingly concerned about its chances of survival.

together as whole they would yield considerable influence that a new CAO would likely support (especially as the Organizational Charter had the support of City Council and the two major Unions).

As it now stands, the DWG has continued to meet with the support of a smaller group who “just decided to keep this going”. According to one Director, for those “who are committed, we have better working relationships than ever before”. The group of Directors actively working together mentioned improved communication with each other, increased engagement of their staff, and better business results. Other Directors mentioned a prevailing sense of “waiting and seeing” and

wariness about change in the midst of shifting power dynamics amongst municipal executives... “we need to know who is steering the ship”.

### Discussion

Most management and organizational theorists will suggest that effective management requires clear and consistent leadership with a clear mandate. In the domain of municipal governance, in the context of today’s turbulent social, economic and political environments, there is no such clarity. City management operates within an environment of continuous unpredictability and flux. Their challenge is how to organize and how to plan beyond the day-to-day firefighting that has become the norm and is consistently raising stress and rendering cities unable to adapt to the global issues they are facing.

The DWG demonstrated a promising model for managing change in a political system. Working collaboratively to manage the many shifting interests, concerns and visions of a democratic system is probably the only adaptive response that cities can affect. The DWG still struggles on as we write this brief report. However, its full benefit to the system has been limited by a variety of factors, including lack of support from municipal executives. While the executives verbally support the intent, they were at the time of implementation caught in their own internal power dynamics with regards to the appointment of a new CAO. When the new CAO is appointed, if they so choose, the executives may be able to re-activate the DWG. Many of the Directors are waiting and hopeful that this will occur.

As action researchers we have learned about the complexity of organizational change in municipal environments and we are currently hypothesizing that new and more effective change processes are required to shift these systems. The system is a complex of political, public, management and union interests and requirements that are all in flux in today’s changing world. This would seem to suggest that all the parts of the whole system need to change and that more holistic and large group interventions need to be developed. This research developed one model that holds promise for future interventions.

If there is a next time, this action research team will try very hard to contract clearly up front with all parts of the system. While we thought we did it this time, but there remains a leap of faith and of practice for politicians and municipal executives to choose to collaborate in the midst of political and economic uncertainty in which their different constituencies seem to be in conflict. They often point to higher levels of government that continuously interfere with their plans

and they seem stuck in a political quagmire that few believe they can change. We suspect that this means that organizational change in municipal governance requires strong community change and new participative democratic forms of citizen engagement (not just public consultations) to change municipal council and in turn change what is expected of municipal executives.

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