

Building a NonProfit Ontario Network Update, September 2007

Since my memo in June 2007 proposing that a network rather than an organization was a better fit for the nonprofit sector¹ two things have happened.

Firstly, in contrast to my first paper which was met with a resounding silence, my network proposal generated many enthusiastic responses. Many of you contacted me to say what a great idea you thought it was and to count you in. Responses continue to come in.

Secondly, an important cross cutting issue has emerged. In May 2007 the Ministry of Government Services Consumer and Corporate Affairs Branch issued a consultation paper on revising the Corporations Act (the legislation that governs nonprofit corporations.) For those of us who have read the consultation paper we found it very complex and technical. It asks questions that are not easily answered without more research and consideration and raises issues that will have far reaching impact on our sector. The initial deadline for responses was July 31, 2007(now extended to September 30, 2007). We will be responding even later than that.

A number of organizations were very concerned about the issues raised in the consultation document and we began to communicate with each other always hoping that the other was able to undertake the work to mount a credible response. When it was clear that none of us were in a position to respond to the issues raised, a letter was drafted and sent to the Ministry requesting an extension to the consultation process; advising them that we were coming together to form a reference group and expressing concern that “public good” nonprofit organizations needed more support to be in a position to respond effectively. Thirty-six organizations/associations signed on to the letter (and that was in the depths of summer).

Since the July letter, a small group of us met with John Mitsopoulos, Acting Director Policy Branch, Consumer and Corporate Relations and his staff to discuss how we could work collaboratively with them to ensure robust and considered involvement in the legislative renewal process, of the “public good” component of the non-profit sector. (the

¹ A bit of background - In the fall of 2006, with the support of an Innovation Fellowship from the Metcalf Foundation, I researched and circulated a paper “*Advancing the Nonprofit Sector*”. The paper explored the experiences of the nonprofit sector across Canada and in other jurisdictions to identify the promising strategies of successful sector-wide organizing efforts. The research found – independent (non-government) funding, cross sector involvement, experienced volunteer and staff leadership, and an open functional structure were key characteristics. Based on these findings, I proposed that a well organized non-profit voice in Ontario with these characteristics would be better able to engage with Government and the public on key sector wide issues more effectively than sub-sectors and other groups working in isolation. I subsequently went into the field to speak with sector leaders and I shifted my view on how best to harness the strength and potential of the nonprofit sector. Coordinated, parallel initiatives; to address common cause has the potential, I believe, to be both more effective and more in tune with how the sector operates. Moreover, it has the added benefit of not over simplifying the sector but allowing it to reflect all its complexities. (papers available www.lynneakin.com)

legislation also covers membership organizations like trade associations, unions, clubs etc.) Ministry staff agreed to prepare a briefing document to help the sector better understand the nature and purpose of the legislation and agreed to respond to some questions and clarifications we had on the first policy document. We are hopeful they will post the introductory document and the responses to our questions on their website as a resource to the field.

This cross cutting issue has arrived a little in advance of us having the basic building blocks of our network in place so we are not as ready as we might be, especially with our communication systems, so please; continue to forward these memos to your networks. This important issue requires a collaborative cross sector response, is prompting us to develop cross sector linkages, and will be a test of how we can use networking to improve our capacity as a sector to participate effectively in public policy.

The next steps are to recruit some legal assistance and identify those of us who are actually interested in and want to get involved in details of legislative reform so we can form an active reference group that can become “expert” for us. For the balance of the sector who are concerned that we have a modern up to date corporations act but do not have the time or interest to become very involved, we hope to ensure you have easily understandable briefing documents on the proposed reforms so you can participate in shaping the reforms and understand the implications for your organization. We are also moving forward on building the network and will keep you posted.

Links

If you are an association or coalition of nonprofit organizations who could provide a network link as we build our communication strategy please contact lynn@lynneakin.com

If you wish to be added to my current mailing list such as it is, please e-mail lynn@lynneakin.com

If you want to be part of the Corporations Act reference group and more involved in the legislative reform please e-mail Tonya Surman, Center for Social Innovation, tonya@socialinnovation.ca

If you want to download a copy of the first consultation paper from Government Services go to <http://www.gov.on.ca/MGS/en/AbtMin/132784.html>

If you want to download a copy of the second consultation paper from Government Services go to <http://www.gov.on.ca/MGS/en/AbtMin/166166.html>

If you prepared a response to the first consultation paper please share it with us. lynn@lynneakin.com