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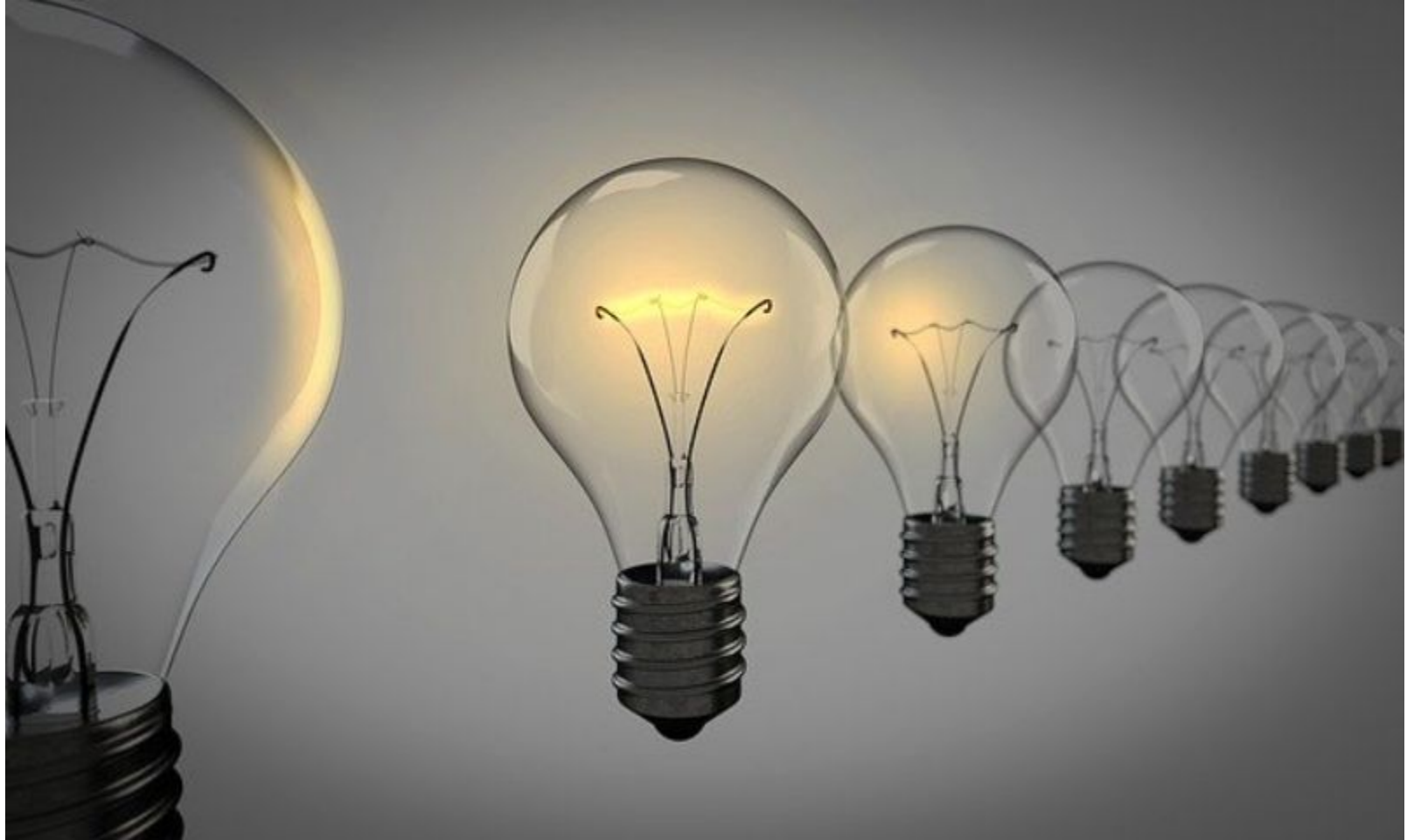
UPDATE
Newsletter



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Spotlight



Re-conceptualizing Ownership: Pathways to Conceptual Expansion

Introduction and Central Question

According to the principles of the Policy Governance® system, owners are the sole source of the board's authority. This makes the concept of 'owners' fundamentally central to the Policy Governance system. However, the concept of 'ownership' is not without its problems. The meaning of 'ownership' varies between cultures and contexts, and is not always associated with positive and empowering connotations. This may pose some challenges in the application of the concept and ultimately render the system of Policy Governance less usable to a wide range of diverse contexts and settings.

Universal concepts should be applicable to any setting. This is not the case with ownership since the concept is not considered neutral by everyone. If we want to make Policy Governance as inclusive as it is meant to be, we need to at least acknowledge the existence of multiple and more nuanced conceptions of ownership; whether the system can accommodate a broader understanding of ownership as a concept; and if any alternative terms may be more appropriate. As the use of Policy Governance becomes more widespread, it seems important to use terms more likely to engender acknowledgement, affirmation and respect for other contexts, cultures and experiences while maintaining conceptual integrity to the system.

John and Miriam Carver have often stressed it is not necessary to use the exact terms that they propose while describing the system of Policy Governance. This includes the word 'owners'. However, choosing a more fitting alternative term only becomes possible after having mastered the theory behind Policy Governance. For some, the concept of ownership is too far removed to even bother to study the system of Policy Governance. Those who come from backgrounds in which 'ownership' is a very distant or even negative word, may find value in using an alternative that better suits their context. In this article, we want to explore possible alternatives and the ways in which these alternatives may help overcome these obstacles.

The central question for this article is: How can we arrive at an expanded conception of ownership that supports a more inclusive use of Policy Governance to a broader set of cultures and contexts?

Structure of the Article

In the remainder of this article, we first draw from literature and personal experience to discuss concerns and challenges with the concept of ownership as currently used in Policy Governance. Then, we will describe three perspectives on the concept of ownership that provide additional insight to the underlying strength of Policy Governance’s use of ‘moral ownership’. After addressing that deeper analysis, we return to our central question to see if we can arrive at an alternative, more inclusive conception of ownership.

Background: Challenges of the Ownership Concept

The increased use of Policy Governance provides the opportunity to further refine underlying concepts and principles fundamental to its design. As the system is used more widely , this helps us revisit concepts and frame them in ways that consider a more diverse set of epistemologies. Now is the time to revisit the concept of ownership in relationship to its application as a universal principle in the way it is understood and defined in Policy Governance. Two developments have contributed to the increased need for this review.

Firstly, there is some sort of crisis of legitimization of the governance function in organizations. It can be argued that an increase in so-called ‘professionalism’ in governance has led to a disconnection between governing bodies, their constituents, other stakeholders, and staff (Freiwirth, 2011). The emphasis on governance expertise can create barriers for people who would likely play a role in governance, but have difficulty relating to the concepts and other specific jargon tied to the system.

On the one hand, Policy Governance alleviates this problem by offering a system of governance based on principles meant to be universally applicable and simple enough for everyone to understand. Finally, since the system takes roles, instead of functions, as a starting point, several roles can be combined to accommodate smaller-sized organizations.

These features make the Policy Governance system ideally suited to be an inclusive, accessible system of governance. Especially, the concept of ‘ownership’,so central to Policy Governance, can play an important role. Specifically, the ownership concept is meant to bridge the gap between governing bodies and the people they serve. However, an important condition for system coherence is the use of concepts that are understandable and relatable to all.

This brings us to the second reason for this revision. Unfortunately, the concept of ownership as currently used in Policy Governance regularly leads to confusion. While the term may be obvious in its use particularly within the corporate sector, it is not as readily transparent in the nonprofit world (Johnson, 2014). When applied to the nonprofit sector, the term can be understood from the vantage point of an investment or exchange of value that then warrants conference of ownership (Carver & Oliver, 2002). However, translation of the ownership term is not necessarily a simple matter in other cultures and settings, especially communities of color. See the personal reflection of co-author Monica (box).

Reflection by Monica

A case in point is the experience of co-author Monica when encountering the owner term as a new director on a Board using Policy Governance. As a woman of color with African-American, Mexican, and Indigenous ancestry, she was immediately uncomfortable with using the term. She thought about her African-American ancestry and how slaves were “owned” as property. She reflected on her great-grandfather, Anthony Boswell, who purchased his freedom and then became an entrepreneur by establishing a Freedman’s Town in Dallas, Texas where he started a grocery store, school, and church. Entrepreneurship for her grandfather was based on principles of communal betterment and opportunity for his people rather than ownership. She thought of her Mexican grandfather, Pedro Madrid, who crossed the Rio Grande into the United States as an adolescent to find opportunity and employment. He faced discrimination as a Mexican immigrant, restricted from pursuing ownership pathways. She thought of her indigenous ancestry and how land was violently and viciously taken from people of sovereign nations so settlers could claim ownership. She thought of covenant practices in the US that prevented racial and ethnic groups from purchasing homes in white neighborhoods. For her, painful memories of the trauma, oppression, and struggles caused by racism, inequity and oppression embodied the owner term. She vividly remembered the pain and confusion she felt as a young five year old when her parents were among one of the first Black families to move to a middle class neighborhood of mostly whites and Asians in Los Angeles and the rejection caused by the “white flight” from neighbors whose parents didn’t want to live next to a Black family. The term “owners” was simply wrought with a troubled and painful history that still holds consequences for communities of color to this day (Burnette, Renner & Figley, 2019; Gaskin, Headen & White-Means, 2004; Ramos, 2001).

To be able to arrive at a more inclusive conception of ‘ownership’ and increase the actual universal applicability of the Policy Governance system, we will first explore the concept a little further. After that, we will try to arrive at a few possible alternatives.

Other Perspectives: Conceptions of Ownership

The meaning of ownership can be discussed from several perspectives. We will consider aspects of morality, autonomy, care and social relations. We will discuss how each perspective helps to achieve a better grasp of ownership, and how it also makes it more problematic.

Moral Ownership

The Policy Governance system stresses that it is the board's job to determine who its owners are (Carver & Carver, 2006, p. 34). For a for-profit company this sounds rather straightforward, as the shareholders obviously are the legal owners of a company. That is not the whole story, though. This is because within the Policy Governance system, the moral obligation to the owners is the most important form of accountability of the board (Carver & Carver, 2006, p. 35). That means that even where legal owners are concerned, the board could influence the composition of its shareholders, or members of an association. After all, it is the board who creates policies, and it might very well create policies that are attractive to some shareholders or members, but not to others (Carver & Oliver, 2002).

For this reason, the concept of 'moral ownership' is central to the Policy Governance system and its usage, and can be considered to be even more important than the concept of formal ownership.

Unfortunately, the concept of 'moral ownership' can be a source of confusion. Is it even possible to talk of 'moral owners'? 'Ownership' has a very strong legal meaning with direct consequences for the relationship between owners and the board. Adding the adjective 'moral' creates an oxymoron from a strict legal perspective, as there are no other owners than legal owners. Since the possibility exists that legal owners are not always moral owners, it might be helpful to use a different word than 'owners', in order to be absolutely clear that the legal implications tied to the word 'owner' are not compatible with the way the term 'owners' is used within the Policy Governance system. Most importantly, in Policy Governance, the board decides who its owners are. Whereas, obviously, in a legal sense, it is the other way around: the owners decide who are on the board.

If we would find the deeper, broader meaning of the distinction between legal and moral owners which is so important to the Policy Governance system, we probably would come closer to finding a suitable alternative.

Ownership as Autonomy

Another approach to ownership is that of autonomy. Autonomy can be considered a prerequisite for a person to take ownership for their actions. Exercising ownership means you can choose what to do as a free, autonomous person, according to your own will. You are not merely acting on someone else's intention, and are not accountable to anyone, of course all within the constraints of the applicable laws in your state or country.

This means that 'owners' can act in an autonomous way over their 'possessions'. For instance: shareholders as legal owners can autonomously determine what they want to do with their shares, and if their stakes in the organization are big enough, can vote for or against certain policies of the board, without having to give account to anyone else.

This conception of ownership as autonomy helps in the sense that it gives clarity. Owners decide, the board has to follow. But this is also exactly why the concept of ownership is difficult to embrace for some people. As Monica's reflection tells us, this perspective on ownership is associated with negative outcomes for a broad group of people, as it emphasizes the power some people have over others, and that could lead to undesirable results from an ethical standpoint.

And even if this strict conception of autonomous ownership is alleviated within the concept of 'moral ownership' in Policy Governance (as described in the section above), this does not solve the problem of negative associations with the word ownership.

Ownership as Care

Instead of stressing the element of autonomy and possession, alternatively we could take the perspective of ownership as care. This word is derived from the Latin word *caritas*, which denotes a universal love people can feel that has to do with compassion and kindness to others. From this love stems their feeling of responsibility for each other. Ownership as care means that people care for the organization and what it means to the world, its purpose.

Stakeholders that would or should (according to the board) care for the organization can be called 'careholders'*. Subsequently, members of the board could be seen as 'care stewards', that act on behalf of the careholders.

As ‘care’ is rooted in deeper feelings of what is considered valuable, the concept of ‘careholders’ is closely related to the core Policy Governance concept of values. After all, the ‘moral’ in moral ownership relates to the value aspect that should be at the core of the dialogue between board and ownership.

Ownership as a Social Construct

A third approach is considering ownership as a social construct. From this perspective, ownership can be seen as something that unites people, as well as something that creates distinctions. Ownership in this sense mediates relationships.

If people have common ownership of an organization, it can create feelings of an extended self. ‘We are ...’ is something that is often said of sports clubs, communities but also companies. The fact that people feel part of a group with a shared purpose, empowers them.

Conversely, the social aspect can be used in a negative way, to make distinctions of others or other groups. “I (we) own this object, you don’t”. Ownership is seen as something that can be used to acquire a certain status apart from or even above others. The interesting thing here is that ‘owners’ in governance is almost always used in a plural sense. Things get complicated in governance when an organization is accountable to a diverse set of owners that have (seemingly) competing interests. It is especially this element of diversity, that Policy Governance seems to tackle, by introducing the difference between formal owners, and moral owners. In doing so, it emphasizes the responsibility of the board to make decisions about who it wants to see as the most important (‘moral’) owners.

However, this often proves to be a difficult task for board members. It can help, if the board approaches it from a social perspective. Which people, although they may be very different on other aspects, feel united through their interest in the existence of our organization? By stressing this aspect of unity, and engaging with prospective stakeholders from this perspective, a virtuous circle can be created. If people experience unity and connection by being treated as ‘moral owners’, they will probably feel more connected with the purpose of the organization, which leads to better ownership relations for the board and in turn helps the board do a better job.

Reflection by Hartger

Although I have been a keen Policy Governance advocate since I first learned about the system, I have always had some hesitations on the concept of ownership. Firstly, because often some conceptual confusion arises between formal and moral owners. Secondly, because although ‘owners’ sounds pretty straightforward, the relationship of a board with its owners is usually anything but. An owner in a legal sense has a final say on things. But in Policy Governance, it is the board that decides who the owners are. Not only is it difficult to logically reconcile those two statements, in my opinion it also may drive a wedge between owners and a board, as if they have separate interests.

Learning from Monica about her reservations with the concept was a real eye-opener to me. I was raised in the Netherlands, a country with its own share of tensions between different cultural backgrounds, but not in the way they exist in the US. Being a white middle class male, I had never realized that ‘ownership’ as a concept could lead to negative connotations, even to the extent of feeling offensive about its use.

This encounter helped me realize, that what I deeply value in the Policy Governance system, is its emphasis on the way governance, when done right, can unite and connect people around a common purpose, a set of common values. That is what I have always experienced when engaging with the Policy Governance community itself, and even now in writing this article.

Conclusion: Alternatives for the Concept of Ownership

This exploration has offered three additional perspectives on (moral) ownership for consideration as alternatives and would contribute to a more inclusive use of the system of Policy Governance. We have discussed the perspective of autonomy, which goes to the agency aspect of ownership. Secondly, we have discussed the perspective of care, which has to do with the mutual interest of owners and board in a common cause that they cherish and nurture. Thirdly, we discussed the perspective of social relations that especially plays a role in settings with a diversity of owners. Being an ‘owner’ can give people a sense of belonging – but also lead to feelings of exclusion.

The central question for this article has been: How can we arrive at an expanded conception of ownership that supports a more inclusive use of Policy Governance to consider a broader set of cultures and contexts?

If we look at the three additional perspectives, terms are suggested that could encompass the agency, the mutual care and the feeling of unity to foster positive connotations about ownership. We personally feel that this is best realized by using the word ‘careholder’. This has the ring of autonomy, it expresses care as the central aspect, and has a connotation of relationship, between board and community, and also between different groups within the community itself.

There are probably other ways of arriving at a more inclusive term. For instance, the recently published ISO 37000 Guidance on Governance uses the term ‘reference stakeholder’ as discerned from legal stakeholders, but still stakeholders that the board allows to have a special influence on its policies. Whatever term is used, it will be essential to emphasize the integral relationship between a governing body and the community that sustains the organization, and makes members of that community genuinely feel respected and included.

* Credits to Karen Fryday-Field, MBA, GSP, Senior Consultant, Meridian Edge Leadership & Governance Consulting and GOVERN's CEO for suggesting the use of the term ‘careholders’.

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It is with great enthusiasm and excitement that I report to you the launch of a new GOVERN for IMPACT Learning Community (Hub). Across North America and the world there are a number of municipal governments and agencies (including special purpose authorities) who use Policy Governance or would like to use Policy Governance to ensure excellence in governance at their organization. GOVERN has a new leader who has agreed to serve as the Municipal Government and Agencies Learning Community Leader... **Matt Carpenter**.

Matt Carpenter has been using Policy Governance since 2016 and graduated from the PGP program in 2018. He has worked in local government for over 20 years, is the CEO of a public transit agency, and former chair of a statewide industry association. He is a dual American/Canadian citizen and has worked in both countries as a government employee and consultant.

Matt along with Mason West (Learning Communities Coordinator) are currently learning the GOVERN for IMPACT Learning Communities practices in Memberclicks, our software for facilitating learning communities. As such, we anticipate the launch of the Municipal Government and Agencies Learning Community in April 2022.





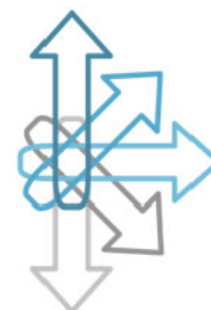
Matt we welcome you to this post and are excited to see what we can create as an inquisitive and sharing learning community. I encourage everyone in the GOVERN community and beyond to share the news of the new learning community so that we can begin with significant momentum coming this April.

Karen Fryday-Field,
GOVERN for IMPACT, CEO

LEARNING COMMUNITY CHARTER
LEARNING COMMUNITY NAME Municipal Governments & Agencies
PURPOSES OF THE LEARNING COMMUNITY This hub is intended for municipal governments and agencies including cities, counties, and villages; as well as special-purpose agencies. Our focus is on helping each other learn how to successfully implement, nurture, and improve the practice of Policy Governance in the municipal sector. John Carver once wrote that local government is the area most in need of good governance. The unique challenges created by elections, public demands, public funds, Politics, and regulatory powers are distinct to local government and require a special forum.
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BRIEF BIO Matt Carpenter has been using Policy Governance since 2016 and graduated from the PGP program in 2018. He has worked in local government for over 20 years, is the CEO of a public transit agency, and former chair of a statewide industry association. He is a dual American/Canadian citizen and has worked in both countries as a government employee and consultant.
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