

GOVERNANCE CULTURE

in a Nonprofit Organization

What is governance culture?

It's the set of collective and individual values, mindsets and behaviors that shape your governance. It's very powerful, yet hard to see. It influences the board and staff leadership's strategic choices, recruitment strategies, who participates in decisions and how they are made, the way agenda are designed and meetings run, how equity is defined and applied, and so much more. Your governance culture can be intentionally fostered by identifying the desired principles driving it, not leaving it to unspoken assumptions, old habits and strong personalities.

Governance culture is the culmination of:

Values - the important core beliefs or principles which guide how we act and speak. For example, they might be values like integrity, curiosity, respect, or fairness.

Mindsets - attitudes and ways of thinking which are held collectively and individually. They are informed by personal values, assumptions, feelings, and philosophical perspectives, which in turn are shaped by factors such as life experiences, social location, or societal ideologies. For example, they may be views on justice, appropriate levels of risk, and how equity is defined and applied.

Ways of interacting - how those who participate in governance act together and toward others. It's linked to values and mindsets, as well as norms and habits formed over the years.

Learn about how culture impacts governance: [Governance Culture Impact Wheel](#).

For more culture tools, go to: Foster an Intentional and Principle-Driven Governance Culture on the [Reimagining Governance Lab](#).

How governance culture manifests

The values, mindsets, and behaviours impacting governance can show up in different ways and are highly interconnected. **Intended** culture rests visibly at the top, while **experienced** culture can be both visible above the water line, and in the murky water just beneath the surface. **Mindsets** mostly sit beneath the waterline, sometimes very deep, and yet have a profound effect on governance.

External forces also shape governance culture, such as policy changes, demographic shifts and significant events

INTENDED

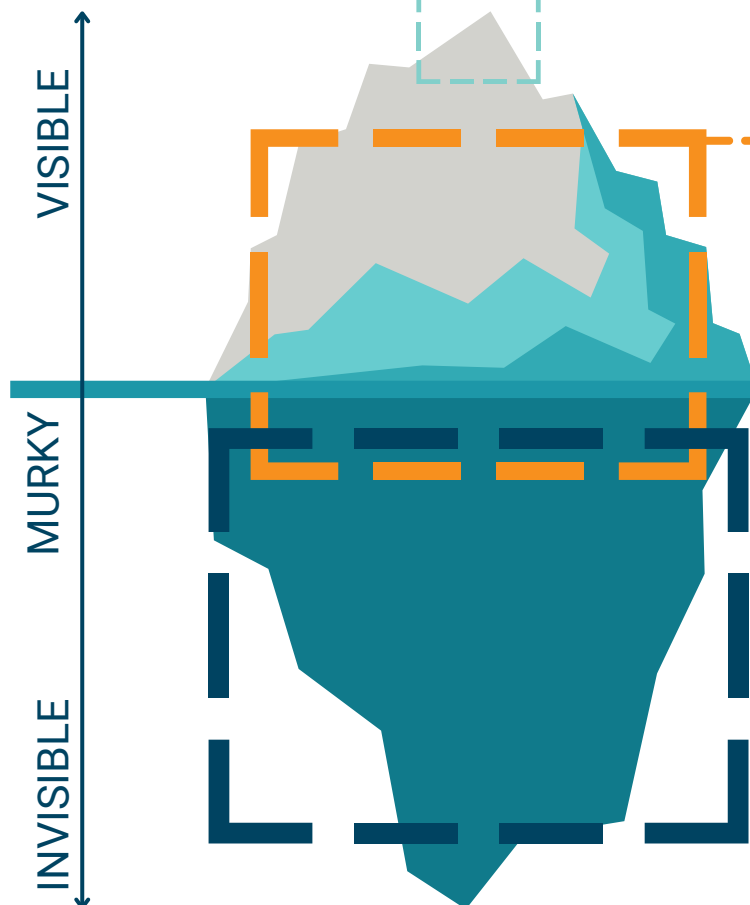
What the organization says its culture should be. **They are clearly stated and documented**, such as in policies or in a value statement.

EXPERIENCED

How governance actually happens. **It's observable, such as in practices, relationships and decisions.** It can be formal (e.g. through policies) or informal (e.g. habits and norms).

VALUES & MINDSETS

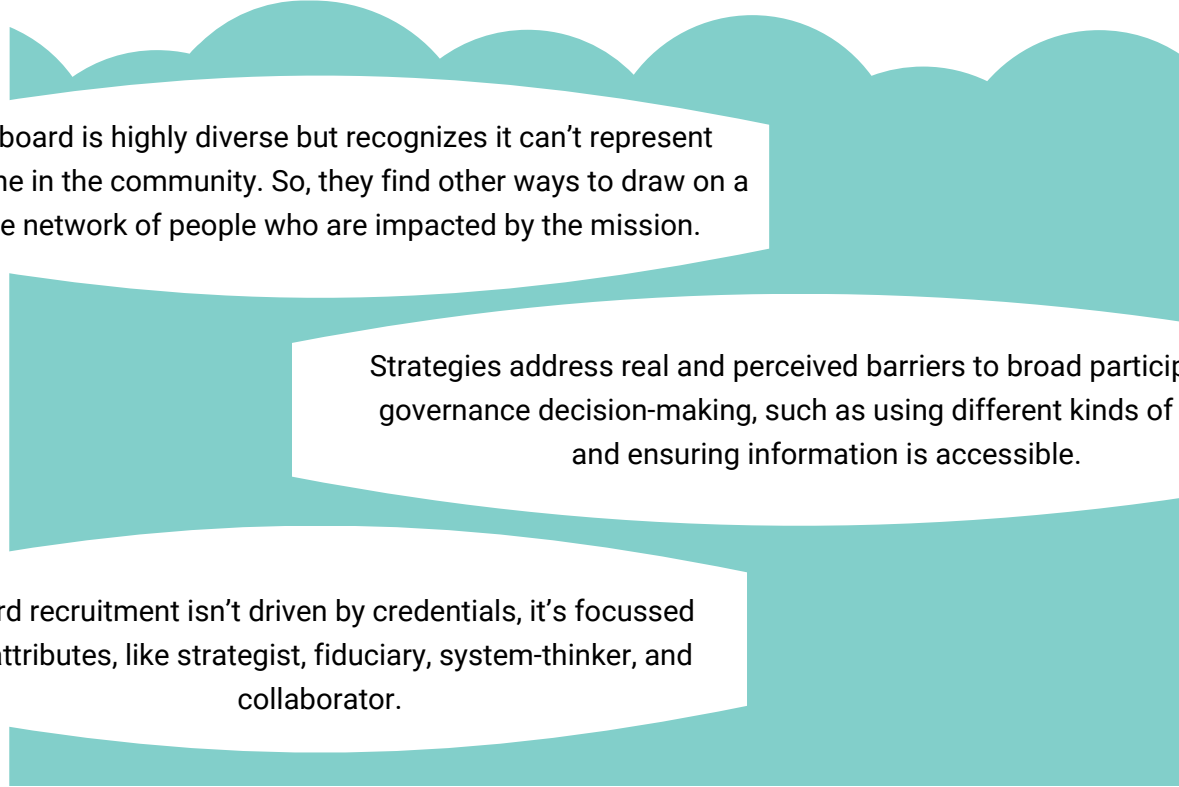
What influences and shapes the intended and experienced culture. It's the attitudes and ways of thinking held collectively and individually by those who participate in governance.



Examples in action

Consider these two scenarios to better understand how culture can impact governance.

Scenario 1 - The board and staff leadership place a high value on a diversity of perspectives, lived experiences, wisdom and knowledge. As a result:

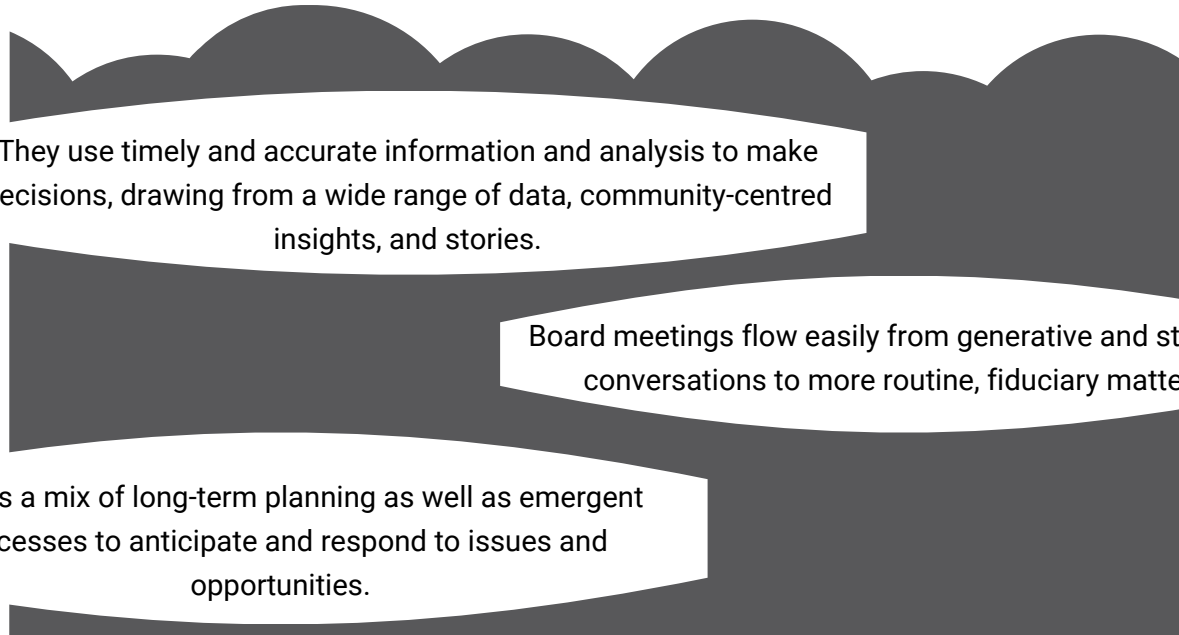


The board is highly diverse but recognizes it can't represent everyone in the community. So, they find other ways to draw on a wide network of people who are impacted by the mission.

Strategies address real and perceived barriers to broad participation in governance decision-making, such as using different kinds of forums and ensuring information is accessible.

Board recruitment isn't driven by credentials, it's focussed on attributes, like strategist, fiduciary, system-thinker, and collaborator.

Scenario 2 - Board and staff leadership are very comfortable with complexity. As a result:



They use timely and accurate information and analysis to make decisions, drawing from a wide range of data, community-centred insights, and stories.

Board meetings flow easily from generative and strategic conversations to more routine, fiduciary matters.

There's a mix of long-term planning as well as emergent processes to anticipate and respond to issues and opportunities.

What are signs that we have an intentional governance culture?

- ✓ The principles driving our governance, articulated as desired values, mindsets, and behaviours, are made explicit - they are clearly described and documented.
- ✓ There's clarity about how these principles translate into governance practice, so they aren't vague words and concepts, and remain consistent even with a change in leadership.
- ✓ The board, leadership team, and others directly participating in governance have formal opportunities to reflect on their own values and mindsets and how they might influence governance practices, relationships, and decisions.
- ✓ All those participating in governance hold themselves personally and collectively accountable for "living" the desired principles and when they aren't, action is taken to address it. The principles are shared with key partners and other groups as one way to strengthen governance accountability.
- ✓ When there are significant changes to our circumstances, such as a major shift in leadership, purpose, or priorities, we revisit the principles and ensure they remain relevant. We also think about how the principles position us to govern in a changing and complex environment.

Check out the Foster an Intentional and Principle-Driven Governance Culture on the [Reimagining Governance Lab](#), including the Create and activate your Governance Principles activity!

This resource is part of the Reimagining Governance Lab, a virtual hub for governance innovation full of resources, tools, and stories. [Visit the Lab.](#)

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