

Perceptions of Governance in Swiss Trade Associations: A Triadic Analysis

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Abstract:

Governance is a complex construct without one general definition. Thus, the perception of governance may vary among stakeholders of associations. This study presents a triadic analysis of board members, CEOs, and members of trade associations on their general perception of governance and on the perceptions of the influence of different stakeholder groups within the strategic decision making process. The underlying assumption is that governance is endogenously determined and is perceived differently from various stakeholders. The results have proven this assumption in that effect that understanding of governance has a similar baseline throughout the different constituents, but there exists a substantial variability on some core issues of governance. Notably, every respondent group showed the somehow natural tendency to shift the responsibilities to the other governance actors. Additionally, the perception of governance is dependent on the personnel experience of governance in other contexts. These findings highlight the importance of clear governance guidelines and written prescriptions of governance tasks.

Author
Prof. Dr. Georg von Schnurbein
Centre for Philanthropy Studies (CEPS)
University of Basel
Switzerland

Contact:
Georg.vonSchnurbein@unibas.ch

Introduction

Governance has gained importance in both research and practice in nonprofit management. There is a common understanding that governance is a premise for a better board performance (Carver, 2001; Holland & Jackson, 1998; Preston & Brown, 2004). Following existing corporate governance standards, nonprofit governance addresses mainly legal and fiduciary responsibilities, most likely transparency, effectiveness, and checks and balances (Stone & Ostrower, 2007). But the concept of governance is still vague and the measurement of governance is inconsistently defined. There is no general acknowledged definition of governance existing.

The reasons therefore are numerous. First, instead of one theory of governance many theoretical approaches coexist and are scrutinized through empirical studies (Alexander & Weiner, 1996; Brown, 2005; Cornforth, 2003; Holland & Jackson, 1998; Miller, 2002). Second, the great variety of nonprofit organizations – agencies, advocacy organizations, foundations, trade associations, etc. – does not support a single perspective on leadership problems in nonprofits (Ostrower & Stone, 2006). Third, the perception of governance varies among the different constituents within one nonprofit organization. The question, what good governance really means, has not been answered yet. Most empiric research focuses on answers of CEOs (Brudney & Murray, 1998) or board members (Golensky, 1993; Holland, 2002) when it comes to governance. On the contrary, several studies have emphasized the relevance of other stakeholder groups for a good governance system (Brown, 2002; Balser & McClusky, 2005; Pfaffenzeller, 2003; Saidel, 1998).

This paper investigates the perceptions of constituents within trade associations. Up to now, governance in trade associations or other member-oriented organizations has not been a subject to many research studies (Tschirhart, 2006). A reason might be that the missing governance subsidies and private donations lower the public interest on accountability and responsibilities of these organizations (von Schnurbein, 2008). One of the core characteristics of this type of organization is the identity of members and clients (Schwarz, 1984). Following this principle, the members are not only legitimating the organization in general, but at the same time they are the primary beneficiaries of the organization's services. The members mandate the association with special tasks, which they expect to be better fulfilled collectively than by the own company.

Therefore, the association is a provider of services for the members, mostly of collective goods, but also of individual services (Lakes, 1999). Collective goods can be collective negotiations or lobbying, individual services include industrial training or legal advice (Schnyder, 2000). Especially in a country like Switzerland with a direct democracy system, the trade

associations have a considerable impact on the society. They do not only represent their members' interest, but they are also connected to political parties or serve as promoters of a referendum (Linder, 1999). Therefore, the statement, made for instance by Carver (2001), that trade associations belong to their members and are guided by a duty to their members is too limited. The major characteristics of governance in trade associations are a high involvement of volunteers at the strategic level, a rather homogeneous membership structure, democratic decision making with several committees involved, and a federalist structure of the organization (Schwarz, 2005). Friedman & Phillips (2004) argue that the different prepositions of trade associations lead to different implications for the governance structure of these organizations.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the different perceptions of governance in trade association. First, we will look at different definitions of governance in order to show the difficulty of developing a coherent understanding of governance. Additionally, there will be a brief review of literature on constituents in trade associations. After that we look at the results of a triadic analysis with 27 qualitative interviews including CEOs, board members and members of associations, testing the underlying assumption that the expectations on and the perception of governance vary among different constituents. The following discussion will show – among others – that there exists a substantial variability on core issues of governance such as supervision or accountability. This leads to the conclusion that governance guidelines of trade associations have to be clearly defined and they have to take into account the expectations of the different constituents.

Research focus and previous literature

The study understands associations from a multiple-constituency approach perspective (D'Aunno, 1992; Zammuto, 1984). Herman and Renz (1997) used this approach in order to measure the organizational effectiveness. They argued that effectiveness is a negotiated product of repeated interactions between organizational actors and their environment. In this view the focus lies on the interactions within and among organizations, the roles of communication and information, and the specific context (Forbes, 1998). Surveying research on governance in the profit and the nonprofit context, Hermalin and Weisbach (2003) come to the conclusion that governance is not a hard fact, but highly endogenously determined. Therefore, a social constructionist perspective expects varying perceptions of governance throughout the constituents, because of their different expectations and judgments (Herman, Renz & Heimovics, 1997). Next to the board and the CEO as the most important actors of governance, other constituents have to be taken into account, as well. In trade associations this applies especially to

the members as governing body and primary clients. Therefore, their perception of governance will affect their satisfaction with the association's services and vice versa.

Like organizational effectiveness, the concept of governance is complex and yet not clearly defined (Bradshaw, 2002; Stone & Ostrower, 2007). First attempts in defining nonprofit governance refer to corporate governance approaches, especially to the agency theory (Fama & Jenson, 1983; Callen, Klein & Tinkelman, 2003). Accordingly, the spotlight of interest is on the board of directors and the CEO. Saidel (1998, p. 421) states, "In the voluntary sector context, governance generally refers to the area of action in which boards of directors and executive staff are key players."

Murray, Bradshaw & Wolpin (1992) investigate the distribution of power between the board and the CEO, finding different patterns of board, chairman, or CEO dominance. Other researchers describe governance by compiling practice oriented tasks, such as formulating strategic goals, financial oversight, monitoring the executive staff, setting policies, and future planning (Drucker, 1990; Holland & Jackson, 1998; Houle, 1997; Ingram, 2003; Miller-Millesen, 2003). The difficulty with the set of tasks is that it can be too general or too precise and run the risk of missing some tasks. Also, governance is not limited to the board of directors. Therefore, other definitions based on the stakeholder theory introduce internal and external constituents and understand the governance tasks contingent on the expectations of the stakeholder groups (Brown, 2002; Miller, 2002).

Looking at associations, we prefer a generic understanding of governance as a concept that includes multiple constituents and stakeholder-related tasks and responsibilities.

In trade associations, three constituents play an important role as governance actors: the board of directors, the executive staff, and the members. The following paragraphs will give a brief literature review on the governance activities of each group.

Board of directors. The board of directors is the most important governance actor, but it is difficult to capture the whole dimension of this role, because the range of responsibilities and the influence of the board is dependent on various factors (Drucker, 1990). Analyzing the perception of governance, we have to ask what activities the governance practices of the board embrace. Coming from an agency theory understanding, governance activities of the board are concentrated on monitoring and control of the executive staff (Fama & Jenson, 1983; Hopt, 2005; Miller, 2002). But especially in normative literature, the listings of relevant board activities are extensive (Carver, 1997; Houle, 1997).

Gill, Flynn & Reissing (2005) use six categories to describe board responsibilities: (1) mission and planning, (2) financial stewardship, (3) human resources stewardship, (4)

performance monitoring and accountability, (5) representation and advocacy, and (6) risk management. Although empirical research testing such lists found a positive correlation between high performing boards and organizational effectiveness (Green & Griesinger, 1996), it is difficult to generalize the way boards should operate. Harris (1993) shows with her “total activity analysis” model, that there is not one best composition of board tasks. Another factor is the personnel performance of each board member. Preston & Brown (2004) found that the individual performance of board members is higher, if they feel responsible for the organization and if they identify themselves with the organization. Miller (2002) reports, that the monitoring function of the board is dependent on the relationship of the individual board members to the CEO and on their professional background.

Executive staff. Herman & Heimovics (1990) doubt that boards really can play the role of the strategic leader of the organization, but that they are highly dependent on the chief executive in order to operate correctly. They propose to accept the CEO as the leader of the board. This highlights one of the core problems of nonprofit management. The CEO usually is the highest paid staff member and therefore at the interface between paid staff and volunteers.

The CEO is at the same time a staff unit and line unit (Schwarz, 2005). As staff unit, the CEO is responsible for facilitating interaction, showing consideration, envisioning innovation for the organization together with the board, promoting board accomplishment, initiating and maintaining board structure, and providing information for the board (Herman & Heimovics, 1990). As line unit, the CEO has to execute the board’s decision and is responsible for the operational effectiveness of the organization. Analyzing this close connection between board and CEO, Saidel and Harlan (1998) developed four different patterns of collaboration: shared governance, staff-dominant governance, board-dominant governance, and bystander.

Members. The members are one of the most influential constituents in associations, because they play different roles (Purtschert, 2005). Members are

- the legitimating body of the organization (an association is constituted by its members),
- contributors of financial means through member fees,
- participators in advisory groups, boards, or as volunteers,
- affected by the association’s activities (collective goods),
- beneficiaries of the association’s activities (service goods), and they are
- executors of norms (e.g. industry norms, security standards).

In order to obtain a stable system of checks and balances, the organization has to set the right incentives to activate the members as governance actors. Especially, the members have to be

addressed as legitimating body and as primary beneficiaries (Schwarz, 1984). The legitimacy of an association is closely connected to the degree of organization. A higher degree of organization gives more credibility and political influence to a trade association. Another task as legitimating body is self regulation and structure. Young, Bania & Baley (1996) argue based on a study on American nonprofit associations that the structure of an organization has an impact on the self regulation and control of performance between local and national units.

Harris (1998) states that for associations, “organization is a matter of balancing competing interests, goals, and values” (p. 155). This highlights the difficulty of matching the individual needs of the members and the long term goals of the association. Members see themselves in the position as client with individual needs rather than as part of the collective association (Watson, 1988). Therefore, their consumer satisfaction will influence their perception of governance. Friedman & Phillips (2004) present a model of governance in association that addresses the structural problems of associations. Their model positions several decision-making groups successively in order to facilitate communication and information flow. This role can also be played by advisory groups. The function of advisory groups is to support the board in the decision-making process with additional expertise (Brown & Iverson, 2004). The members of advisory groups are usually volunteers and can be members of the association or external experts (Schwarz, 2005). Saidel (1998) distinguished advisory groups as important governance instrument with internal and external effects to the organization.

Methods and Sample

The literature review shows that governance is a complex construct with various aspects which can lead to different expectations. For instance, Harris (1989) found different perceptions of governance between the board members and executive staff. This survey tries to answer the questions, how the perceptions of governance and of governance tasks among board members, CEOs and members of associations differentiate and how these respondents define board effectiveness.

The study is based on a holistic case study design with ten trade associations taken from a larger study. The sample is structured by the size of the organizations (measured by number of members). Additionally, the associations are chosen from different industries. They represent industries like hospitals, handcraft, heavy industry, service industries, and self-employed professions. The ten case studies can be further divided into five industry associations, three professional associations, one union, and one umbrella organization for unions. Their size ranged from 77 to 1700 members in associations with organizational members and from 2224 to 102459 members in associations with individual members. In the Swiss context, a trade association (resp.

professional association or union) can be considered small with less than 100 members (10000) and large with more than 1000 members (100000).

With these ten associations a triadic analysis was performed with semi-structured in-depth interviews of the CEO, a board member and a member of the association (non-board member). This research design should allow gathering different opinions on the same subject, and comparing and analyzing the position of one group, e.g. management, board, members, or different organizations (Frick, 2000).

The relative newness of governance research in member-oriented organizations supports the choice of qualitative methodology (Yin, 2003). Unfortunately, only 27 interviews could be gathered, because in one organization only the CEO was willed to answer and in another organization no board member wanted to participate. The interviews were conducted in the spring of 2006 and were afterwards transcribed, coded and analyzed through a summarizing interpretation and with the software maxqda2. Considering the size and nature of this sample, caution is suggested in generalizing the findings of the study. Further research should verify the robustness of the results.

Results

In this section we are going to present the results from the interviews structured in three different areas. First, the general perceptions of governance will be presented. Second, the interview data will be analyzed looking at different governance actors and their influence on the strategic decision making process. Third, the governance task of the board will be analyzed by comparing the answers of the three respondent groups.

Perceptions of governance. In the literature review we have shown that governance is a multi-faceted and endogenously determined concept (Hermalin and Weisbach, 2003). Additionally, the perception of governance in the Swiss context is influenced by its British American origin. First adopted by the profit sector, governance became a major concern of nonprofit management within the last five years (von Schnurbein, 2008). Until now, no German translation of the term “governance” has been found, a fact that leads to misunderstandings and wrong interpretations.

Thus, it is not surprising that the general perception of governance, especially of the volunteer board members, is not only positive. When they were asked about their general understanding of governance, many mentioned general guidelines such as statutes or policies. In terms of content, one half of the directors named managerial task such as leadership, accounting and a constructive collaboration of board and management. The other half of the directors mentioned governance principles such as checks and balances between the board and the management, transparency and compliance. Seven of nine directors felt a higher complexity of

association governance compared to corporate governance. This statement usually referred to the members influence, the more complex stakeholder relations, and different goal orientation.

The CEOs responded to the same questions in a slightly different manner. They highlighted the importance of written guidelines, especially the policies. Good division of power between the operative and strategic leadership was the most important governance principle, followed by others like checks and balances and transparency in decision making processes. For CEOs from associations with organizational members, the management tasks of leadership and accountability were mentioned, as well. Only two CEO made a connection between governance and the organizational performance. For CEOs, the governance of associations is further affected by a higher number of stakeholder involved and – due to democratic procedures – a clumsiness of decision making processes. Therefore, four of ten CEOs see the complexity of governance in their organizations in influence of the members and the difficult definition of measurable goals, as the following example shows:

„Based on purpose and structure an association is always obliged to comply to certain things. ... We are obliged to involve the members and their goals. That is more difficult than just focusing on the annual returns.“

During the interviews it became obvious that the concept of governance is relatively new for the member respondents. If they knew something about it, it was based on their professional experience in profit organizations. In contrast to the other interview groups the importance of written guidelines was of minor interest. The members put an emphasis on transparency and clear organizational structures. Additionally, operative management tasks such as quality management, accountability, and leadership are often mentioned as part of a governance system. Only one member respondent made a connection between governance and organizational performance.

Next to the complexity of goal definition, their own role as governance actors is seen critically by one half of the members. In their opinion, the articulation of different interests is not accomplished sufficiently, what leads to dissatisfaction with the association's management (Harris, 1998). A member of an industry association states:

„In an association it is more difficult because the expectations are versatile and are often not articulated beforehand. Suddenly they erupt and have to be solved quickly. In an association it is important as well to define goals and benchmarks. But we know that the big members will protest against anything for the small members and vice versa.“

In summary, the interviewees answers gave a disperse picture of governance. This finding covers with the former made assumption that there is not one general definition of governance existing. Although the answers had all the same general tendency towards governance as a leadership concept for the strategic orientation of the association, different aspects were stressed by each group. From members' point of view, governance should lead to better and clearer structures. CEOs focus on the division of power between the strategic and the operative management. Among board members two different perspectives were dominant. One group focused on management tasks and the other group highlighted governance principles. This difference can be explained with the different experiences the board members have made with governance in their professional context.

This connection explains the stronger management orientation in associations with organizational members, as well. Here, the member representatives transfer their experience in their working field into the association. These findings are consistent with existing empirical research that stressed the diversity of governance concepts and the endogenous determination (Herman and Renz, 1997; Pfaffenzeller, 2003; Schuhen, 2002; Siebart, 2006).

Governance actors. From a stakeholder approach perspective, governance is not only a matter of the board and the CEO. Neither the board nor the CEO will always take their decision in the members' interest, but they may represent themselves or other stakeholder groups (Tschirhart, 2006). Therefore, the respondents were asked in a first step to name the relevant stakeholder groups that influence the strategic decision making process. In a second step they were asked to classify the influence of different stakeholder groups taken from the literature on the strategic decision making process in the board. To the first question, the CEO and the board were listed by nearly all respondents. But after these two, the three respondent groups gave different valuations. The board members mentioned the members, the member representatives, and specific external stakeholders (for instance courts), while the CEOs focused more on collaborators, the members and their representatives. Here, it becomes obvious that the board is more oriented to the association's environment and the CEO has a stronger inside perspective (Middelton, 1987). Only half of the member respondents listed themselves and their representatives and only a few of them mentioned external stakeholders. This is a significant difference to their answers to the second question, where they had to rate the influence on the board of some given stakeholder groups.

As shown in table 1, all groups of interviewees gave the CEO the most influence. But the members rate their influence much higher than the CEOs and especially the board members themselves do. On the other side, the board members feel a higher influence of the association's staff. The CEOs report a comparable influence of delegates, members, and collaborators.

Interestingly, both media and political parties a rated rather low by all respondents. The high importance of state authorities and other stakeholders can be explained by their relevance for single aspects, e.g. jurisdiction or affiliated associations.

Table 1: Influence on the decision making process of the board (5 very high; 1 very low)

Rating	CEO	delegates	members	collaborators of the association	Political parties	State authorities	media	Other external Stakeholder
Total average (standard deviation)	4.2 (s=0,7)	2.6 (s=0,9)	2.8 (s=1,2)	3.0 (s=1,0)	2.1 (s=1,0)	3.1 (s=1,2)	2.3 (s=1,1)	3.3 (s=1,0)
CEO n=10	4.1 (s=0,9)	3.0 (s=1,1)	2.9 (s=1,2)	2.7 (s=1,2)	2.2 (s=1,3)	3.0 (s=1,4)	2.2 (s=1,0)	2.9 (s=1,1)
Board members n=9	4.1 (s=0,6)	2.7 (s=0,8)	2.1 (s=1,2)	3.4 (s=0,7)	2.0 (s=0,7)	3.7 (s=1,3)	2.0 (s=1,0)	3.4 (s=1,0)
members n=8	4.4 (s=0,7)	2.2 (s=0,4)	3.3 (s=1,0)	2.9 (s=1,0)	2.1 (s=0,8)	2.8 (s=0,7)	2.6 (s=1,2)	3.6 (s=0,9)

These figures illustrate that in the decision making process of the board the interests of the members compete with the interest of other stakeholder groups of which some have a higher relevance than the legitimating members themselves. A point of discussion is the differences between the interviewees' answers given in the first place and their rating scales. One explanation for this difference of relevance might be that the external stakeholders have a higher influence on the board in single decisions, whereas the members have a constant influence on all decisions. One might think of a vocational school led by a trade association that has to be adapted to new state authority standards. Although the members have to vote on the topic, the main influence comes from the state department of education. But the state department does not have any influence on other fields of activity of the association.

Governance tasks. Looking at the governance tasks of the board, the answers of the respondents were compared with the board's responsibilities written in the statutes. The listings in the statutes resembled each other closely, naming strategic leadership, CEO recruitment, preparation of the general assembly, political leadership, external representation of the association, and the annual report/budget as the most common tasks. Instead, the answers of the respondents were more heterogeneous and only the strategic leadership was mentioned by a majority. The next frequent answer with only eleven references was the participation in mission-related tasks. The representation of member interest was mentioned only by eight people, the supervision of the CEO only by seven persons (six of them were member respondents).

When the respondents were asked afterwards to rate the importance of some governance task of the board taken from the literature, the results show that except for one case the members have considerable different opinions than the respondents in leadership positions (see table 2).

They somehow feel not as much represented through the board composition and have a higher expectation on external relationships. Concerning the supervision of the CEO, it is the CEOs who rate this task higher than the other groups.

Table 2: Rating of governance tasks of the board (1=low - 5=high)

task	total N=27	CEOs n=10	Board n=9	Members n=8
Supervision of the CEO	2,7 (s=1,4)	3,3 (s=1,4)	2,4 (s=1,3)	2,4 (s=1,2)
Board composition reflects the membership basis	3,5 (s=1,3)	3,7 (s=1,7)	3,6 (s=1,3)	3,0 (s=0,9)
Member representation is more important than expertise	2,3 (s=1,3)	2,8 (s=1,2)	2,7 (s=1,4)	1,4 (s=0,6)
Representation of the association	2,9 (s=1,1)	2,2 (s=1,4)	2,6 (s=1,2)	3,9 (s=0,6)
Securing relevant/critical resources	3,8 (s=1,4)	3,6 (s=1,5)	3,4 (s=1,4)	4,1 (s=0,7)

Another important aspect of governance tasks is the collaboration of the board and the CEO. As presented in the literature review the potential of completed staff work is especially high in this relationship as the CEO prepares and implements the board's decisions. The way, the respondents described the relation of board and CEO resembled in most cases the pattern of Saidel and Harlan (1998) called shared governance. Surprisingly, the CEOs tended a little bit more to board-dominant governance, while the board members tended to staff-dominant governance. In combination with the results of the ratings of governance tasks, an interesting tendency is revealed. While the CEOs stress the accountability of the board, the board reacts in the opposite way.

Discussion

The study's aim was to capture the perception of governance from different stakeholders in trade associations and unions. The underlying assumption was that governance is endogenously determined and is perceived differently from various stakeholders. The results have proven this assumption in that way that understanding of governance has a similar baseline throughout the different constituents, but there exists a substantial variability on some core issues of governance.

Especially, the important tasks of monitoring and accountability are evaluated with a different relevance (Holland 2002). Generally, every respondent group showed the somehow natural tendency to shift the responsibilities to the other governance actors. As already stated by other authors, the collaboration between board and executives in nonprofits is more likely to be shaped as a co-operative relationship than a principal-agent relationship (Miller, 2002). These findings highlight the importance of clear governance guidelines and written prescriptions of governance tasks. Otherwise, no one will execute the governance responsibilities (Carver, 1997).

Another relevant factor for the perception of governance is the personnel experience of governance in other contexts. Member representatives in associations with organizational members showed a clearer but also business-like understanding of governance, while the member representatives in associations with individual members had more difficulties in describing the governance system of their organization.

The analysis of the governance actors showed that the member interests compete with other stakeholder interests in the board's decisions, although it is elected by the membership. What can be said is that members have a more constant influence on the board, while other stakeholder groups have an influence on special fields of activities. Nevertheless, members have to be aware of placing their interests actively in the board's decision making process, because the board does not always feel linked to their legitimating membership basis. Possible mechanisms to assure a higher orientation on member interests of the board could be advisory groups (Saidel, 1998) or a sequential linkage between different member committees (Friedman/Phillips, 2004).

Another considerable difference of the governance perception of the CEOs and the board members was the organizational perspective. While the CEOs tended to have a managerial and internal perspective on governance, the board members often were more oriented towards the external environment. The member respondents expected a more external perspective from the boards, as well. In literature this attitude is referred to the boundary spanning role (Middelton, 1987).

Finally, the strong variations of member's perceptions in comparison to the perceptions of the board members and the CEOs show a lack of inclusiveness of the board. The member representatives seemed to have more of an outside view on the association than the feeling of being a part of the organization.

Therefore, future research should analyze in more detail the correlation between customer satisfaction and participation habits of members in associations. In addition, new possibilities and mechanisms to involve members better in the governance process should be developed. If governance is understood as a endogenously determined concept, the usability of governance codes has to be questioned. It seems to be more effective, if associations write down their own governance principles that fit to their organization.

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