

Strategic governance and management for think tanks

By Enrique Mendizabal | November 2017

The governance and management of think tanks and policy research organisations is not an easy subject to discuss. It is full of complexities, and the discussion has to take into consideration the different contexts in which think tanks operate. Unlike policy research and communications where they may be universal best practices, there isn't a single model for effective governance, but there are certainly some lessons that organisations in all contexts would benefit from being aware of.

Although governance and management concerns are often at the top of the list of challenges for any think tank leader, few efforts are aimed at strengthening them; rather, think tanks (and funders) often pay greater attention to fundraising, research quality and communications. Governance and management issues are more frequently looked at when a big crisis arises – usually as a consequence of not having invested in these areas before or not noticing the symptoms early enough.

But while **fundraising, research and communications** involve important aspects of policy research institution's development, without an appropriate governance arrangement and management competencies, think tanks are unlikely to be able to deliver sustainable funding strategies, high quality research, and effective communications.

What is the best governance and management structure for a think tank? How does it affect its work and how can it drive high quality research and policy influence? This background note provides an outline of the topic with the intention to inform a deeper discussion on it among key stakeholders of each organisation.

What do governance and management involve?

This course cannot cover all aspects of think tank governance and management. This theme encompasses governing bodies, boards, senior management and line management, fundraising and the allocation of funds, communications, human resources, finance experts, etc.

At On Think Tanks we argue that governance and management for think tanks have to include all of these areas. The complexity of these organisations demands this, and, to create an environment conducive for success, the way in which these are articulated require strategic guidance.

A think tank's set-up can mark the difference between success and failure. A proliferation of outputs and success in influencing policy is only temporary if the internal structure of an organisation is not strong.

For instance, think tanks need a strong, competent and committed board to steer them through choppy waters. A weak board will miss the tide, it will

not be able to support its director (it may not even be able to appoint the most appropriate director), won't be able to invest in long term initiatives or in new skills for future challenges. Even a well-funded and very visible organisation with a weak board and senior management may be gone from one day to the other.

We define governance as the organisational arrangement that describes the way the various parts of the organisation are brought together and the rules of their interactions.

Management, we consider to involve the practical aspects of the organisation's functioning: team and project management, staffing, line management, etc.

In particular, this short course addresses to two elements crucial for effective think tanks: boards and the management for research. While these do not begin to cover all aspects of governance and management for think tanks, they offer important lessons that may be applied beyond their original scope.

Think tank Boards

To go into detail on the particularities of each type of board, we must first recognise that there are different kinds of think tanks. For this purpose, Diane Stone's classification, which relates to their origin, can be useful: from independent civil society think tanks established as non-profit organisations to governmentally created or state or party sponsored think tank, through policy research institutes located in or affiliated to a university and corporate created or business affiliated think tanks.

The nature of each, can tell us a great deal about their governance structure. For example, most state sponsored think tanks will not have the same type of board than an independent civil society think tank or a political party think tank. Think tanks could all also have secondary boards such as advisory boards or management committees depending on their origin. Think tanks with strong academic foundation might not need an advisory board but think tanks with a non-academic origin may use them to gain a few academic credentials.

Several factors such as the legal, economic, political and social context of a nation can also influence the way a think tank's board is set up.

Through research at On Think Tanks we identified three main types of boards: corporate boards, membership boards, and secondary boards

1. *Corporate Boards*: A corporate board of directors is in charge of mainly two tasks: defining and maintaining the think tank's original goals and values, and determining and ensuring its finances. According to Raymond Struyk, a corporate board's role can have three aspects: legal, functional and symbolic.

We describe them as corporate boards because they are quite similar to those of for profit organisations. They can also be referred to as legal boards, as their responsibility for the finances and appropriate functioning of the think tanks they govern is determined by their country's legislation.

This type of board of directors usually has the responsibility of appointing an Executive Director, who in turn has the responsibility of appointing and overseeing the staff and all the think tank's day to day activities. The Overseas Development Institute in the UK and Grupo FARO in Ecuador have Corporate Boards.

2. *Membership Boards*: In some think tanks, an assembly is formed, consisting of all those individuals that are associates to the organisation, usually its researchers and founding members. This assembly is the highest governing body and periodically meets and chooses an Executive Council and/or the Executive Director, either from within the members or from the outside.

In this model, the assembly tends to delegate many executive responsibilities to an Executive Council, or a sub-set of members, who acts as a management committee, in charge of the organisation's day to day activities. In some cases, the Executive Council appoints an Executive Director and in other cases it chooses one from among its own ranks. The Instituto de Estudios Peruanos in Peru has a Membership Board.

The membership board is often referred to as a political body; the leaders are elected by the members rather than interviewed for a job.

It is possible for both models to be combined thus dividing "political" responsibilities (Membership Boards) from "executive" ones (Corporate Boards).

3. *Secondary Boards*: Think tanks may have a board of directors, corporate or membership, and a second body that either supports or replaces it. They may, for instance, have a Management Committee made up either of members of the board in the form of a sub-committee to advise and monitor the executive director, or comprise of members of the board to effectively manage the think tank. It differs from the board of directors in that it has a more day to day role in the organisation's activities.

There can also be an Advisory Board. These are usually made up of individuals who have had experience in the public sector and in academic research and who give guidance on the types of research that the institute should undertake. Unlike the board of directors, advisory boards do not have fiduciary responsibility and so are not responsible for the institution's audit or state of its finances.

According to Diane Stone, advisory boards that are comprised of eminent scholars and professionals may add prestige to the organisation.

TYPES OF BOARD COMPOSITIONS AND BOARD MEMBERS

The combination of board models and the types of individuals that make a part of them have a significant impact on the way a think tank approaches and achieves its objectives. Think tanks may either prioritise including a diverse group of people in their boards or individuals with specific skill sets and expertise that are more in line with the think tank's interests. Individuals with links to corporations, and financial resources, may also be pursued. Those think tanks affiliated to a governmental ministry or department usually have boards appointed by government officials, and the individuals chosen are likely to be current or former public officials and other agents close to the government. Others, such as more technocratic think tanks, may prefer to include in their board of directors or secondary boards individuals that can assure the independence and impartiality of the institution, usually international members.

What type of board governs your organisation?

Source: <https://onthinktanks.org/articles/think-tank-boards-composition-and-practices/>

We will explore the roles of these boards in greater detail during the first webinar.

Management for research teams

Management overlaps with governance in that it reflects the nature of the organisational arrangement that the think tank has established for itself. It is affected by, and affects, for instance, the presence of a senior management board, middle-management roles (for example, of department or programme leaders), and the degree of responsibility awarded to the Executive Director.

In this course we will focus on management arrangements for research (that is, the roles and responsibilities that research teams may be awarded) which includes line management considerations.

Line management refers to the team and management for research focuses on delivering high quality policy research.

This involves at least two key elements: research team structures (how the think tank organises its research teams and how the teams themselves are organised) and line-management within research teams and projects.

1. *Research team structures*: According to Raymond Struyk, think tanks can choose from one of two extremes: teams or stars.

While the “solo star” model is based on the presence of notable and influential researchers who work on their own, with the support of research assistants; the team model relies on research being conducted by teams.

Each model has consequences on the kind of work the think tank is able to deliver. The stars model is likely to involve shorter or single research projects while the team model is likely to involve longer-term and larger-scale programmes.

In practice, think tanks organise their research teams in various ways. We have identified four main approaches:

- Associates on short term contracts from the think tank
- Researchers working on their own policy research agendas with or without thematic coordination and with the support of assistants and associates
- A central and permanent pool of researchers with specialist senior researchers who focus on one or more policy research agendas or projects
- Research teams, departments or areas by discipline or policy issue with clear line management

The choice of model, according to Struyk, is likely to be influenced by several factors including: type and size of projects, variability of the workload, flexibility of the staff, tax and social fund consequences, and institutional reputation.

Similarly, think tanks that choose to group their researchers in teams may wish to prefer to organise them along discipline or policy lines. For instance, some think tanks have departments that reflect the disciplinary background of their researchers: economics, political science, natural resources, etc. Others prefer departments focused

on policy issues or challenges: housing reform, corruption, urban poverty, etc.

DOES YOUR THINK TANK OPT FOR A SOLO STAR OR A TEAM MODEL?

2. *Line management*: line management arrangements and processes are crucial to guarantee the effective functioning of teams and think tanks. They refer to the chain of command and relations of hierarchy within a think tank and a team. Even in circumstances in which researchers act rather independently from each other or from the organisation or in new more horizontal business models, a minimum degree of leadership and line management are necessary.

Line management should focus on the most effective allocation of human resources to deliver the organisation's mission, in supporting those resources, and enhancing their capabilities.

Good practice and the literature suggest some of the following considerations in developing appropriate line management arrangements to lead and support teams and projects:

- Best practice guidelines at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) suggested that no manager should line manage more than five people.
- Line management roles should be adequately resourced with sufficient time allocated to managers to work with and support their teams.
- Line management choices should not be driven by seniority imperatives but by the most effective use of talent to deliver project, programme and organisational objectives. Often the most senior and experienced researchers can play important roles as members of a team rather than as their leaders.
- Line management tools such as staff performance assessments should be used, primarily, to support staff development and overall team performance rather than for accountability purposes.
- Depending on the composition of teams, line management arrangements could include multiple management hierarchies. For example, a young researcher could be line managed by the leaders of more than one project (in a solo star model) and, similarly, a communications officer could be line managed by a research programme leader and the head of communications.

In search of best practice on governance and management

Although there are no one-size-fits-all arrangements there are a few best practices that will be further explored during the course. These include:

1. Boards should provide long term leadership for the think tank in a way that it is free from short term and staff interests;
2. Board composition should consider think tanks organizational needs as well as thematic interests;
3. A think tank's governance arrangement should overlap with management systems and process to ensure a cohesive model from top to bottom;
4. Governance and management skills are fundamental for effective think tanks. Failure to invest in the right competencies and skills can

- have negative effects on research quality and communications;
5. Think tanks need to balance hierarchical arrangements with more horizontal approaches to work and governance which are emerging in all sectors. This suggests that governance and management practices need to be routinely monitored and evaluated.

What comes next?

This course is an opportunity to reflect and learn about these and other aspects of think tank governance and management.

With this in mind, the first webinar will discuss think tank boards in greater detail paying particular attention to the roles of boards and how to assess their effectiveness. We will use examples of key board roles (such as supporting organisational development processes and managing the transition of executive directors) to illustrate how boards can make a difference to think tanks.

The second webinar will look at how research programmes can be organised and pay greater attention to line-management tools such as mentoring and performance assessments. We will explore common challenges faced by think tanks as well as think tank managers and recommendations to address them.

Further Reading

On Think Tanks has produced a reading list on governance and management:
www.onthinktanks.org/series/think-tanks-governance-management/
