

How to Move a Board Forward:
The Benefit and Impact of the Board Performance Self-Assessment Questionnaire for Nonprofit
Organizations

by
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Abstract

Nonprofit organizations are a great value to society, fulfilling many social functions. In the past 25 years, the call for greater nonprofit accountability and performance evaluation has fueled an outpouring of resources and empirical research into this sector. Opportunities for a board to assess its own performance have been shown to be valuable for the development of effective nonprofits, and the Board Performance Self-Assessment Questionnaire is a new online tool available at no cost. This is a qualitative evaluative study of the BPSAQ assessing the benefits and limitations of the tool, as well as the expected impact on the boards that utilized it. The study gathered perspectives from seven users of the BPSAQ through the use of semi-structured interviews and a short questionnaire designed from the common themes that arose through the interviews. The findings of this study show that the BPSAQ is perceived to be user-friendly, comprehensive, and accurate in its results. The interview data suggests numerous benefits of the tool, and the responses to the follow-up questionnaire show that all participants believed it was a healthy and useful and would lead to positive change for each of their organizations. The study provides important data asserting the value of the BPSAQ for nonprofits, as it has proven to be an encourager of change and a comfortable way to move a board forward.

Keywords: board, nonprofit, self-assessment, qualitative, performance, evaluative

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Dedication

My daughter Leilani is just 2¹/₂ years old as I write this. Because of her age, she does not comprehend the sacrifice of time with her Daddy that she is making for the sake of my schooling. She will not remember this lost time as she ages. She will not remember the months of saying “goodbye Daddy” every time she saw me, because our time together rarely lasted longer than a few minutes. This loss that she will not remember has made it possible that no future children endure the same pain.

My wife Jennie-Lynne is a little older than Leilani, and she will remember some of the hurt that this degree has caused. She has taken the role of a single parent as I have devoted myself to reading and writing. She has given up our dining room table to my books and papers. She had to be the one to explain to Leilani why Daddy could not be bothered while I worked at the table or slept in after a long night writing. She also gave up the time she deserves with her husband. Jennie-Lynne made these sacrifices knowingly, unlike Leilani, and I know she did so with pleasure as she saw me work hard. But I know it has been a hard struggle that she is eager to see come to an end.

I dedicate this work to my wife and daughter because it was my separation from them that gave me the encouragement to persist through the tough moments and strive to finish as quickly as possible. I love you both.

Chapter One – Introduction

Approximately 161,000 registered nonprofit and voluntary organizations operated in Canada in 2003, employing over two million people, utilizing the services of some 19 million volunteers, and receiving over \$110 billion in annual revenues (*Cornerstones of Community*, 2005). Evidence shows these numbers grow at a rate of approximately 6% each year (Hall, 2009). Nonprofits include a wide variety of organizations, such as day-care centres, sports clubs, arts organizations, social clubs, private schools, hospitals, food banks, environmental groups, trade associations, places of worship, advocates for social justice, and groups that raise funds to cure diseases. What they have in common is their service to the public, the lack of profit flow to owners, and the requirement that a board of volunteer directors govern them.

For the past 25 years, there has been a growing number of books, articles, websites, and workshops aimed at informing those who lead boards how to do it better (e.g. Carver, 1997; Chait, Ryan, & Taylor, 2005; Drucker, 2005; Gill, 2005; Light, 2001; Masaoka, 2003). There has also appeared a much smaller body of literature reporting on empirical research into why boards behave as they do and the extent to which their behaviour affects the performance of the organization they serve (e.g. Bradshaw, Murray, & Wolpin, 1992; Candler & Dumont, 2010; Herman, & Renz, 1998; Holland & Jackson, 1998; Nobbie & Brudney, 2003; Sonnenfeld, 2002).

Although the literature does not always agree, and the “how to” books rarely include empirical evidence, there are some trends that have emerged. Two of the most significant reasons why boards fail to perform effectively are that their members do not know what is expected of them or they lack the skill and knowledge needed to make good decisions (Block, 2004). The most direct way to deal with this problem is through a well-planned system of board selection, orientation, development, and evaluation (Brudney & Murray, 1998; Green & Gresinger, 1996; Herman & Renz, 1997, 2000; Herman, Renz, & Heimovics, 1996; Holland & Jackson, 1998;

Nobbie & Brudney, 2003; Price, 1963).

Purpose of the Inquiry

The context outlined above, which I further detail in Chapter Two, provides many research possibilities. The matter of board effectiveness, and even more specifically, board evaluation, was the central focus of this inquiry. Regardless of the tools or methods used, periodic formal or informal assessments of a board's own performance has been shown to lead to more effective boards and successful organizations (Brudney & Murray, 1998; Candler & Dumont, 2010; Green & Gresinger, 1996; Herman & Renz, 2000). Feedback surveys are one of the tools that can enable evaluation, and Vic Murray and Yvonne Harrison created an instrument in 2009 that could be proven valuable. Their Board Performance Self-Assessment Questionnaire (BPSAQ) provides a simple but comprehensive quantitative evaluation for overall board performance.

A previous version of the BPSAQ was tested for reliability and validity, and revised to remove those questions and areas of study that proved to be unreliable (Harrison & Murray, 2010 2009). The BPSAQ now exists as a free online tool (available at www.boardcheckup.com) that nonprofit boards can access and utilize, receiving two feedback reports that detail areas of concern for effectiveness and offer suggestions for how to improve.

Although the questionnaire has been tested quantifiably for reliability and validity, the problem this present inquiry has addressed is its value to the organizations that utilize it, which previously had not been examined. The purpose of this qualitative evaluative study was to discover how members of nonprofit boards who take part in the BPSAQ describe their experience with the tool. Do users view the questionnaire as beneficial and believe its results provide the opportunity to lead their nonprofit board toward positive change and greater effectiveness? Through qualitative interviews, I discovered the views of seven leaders from three Vancouver Island nonprofit organizations, answering the following research questions:

1. What were the perceived benefits of the BPSAQ for the three nonprofit organizations?
2. What limitations of the BPSAQ did the participants experience?
3. What is the perceived potential for positive impact as a result of taking part in the BPSAQ for the three nonprofit organizations?

The findings of this study are aimed specifically at researchers and educators in the nonprofit sector, and those who are in positions of leadership in these nonprofit organizations: Executive Directors, board members, program managers, and volunteer leaders. The discussion will also be insightful for students in university and college programs that are intended to prepare future leaders in this important sector, as they consider the best ways to evaluate organizations and their own board of directors.

Situating the Researcher

This inquiry grew out of my experience in the nonprofit sector and desire to see it flourish. I have been closely involved in numerous nonprofits for nearly two decades, through volunteer work, employment, and as a member of the board of directors. I currently serve on the board for one nonprofit organization, volunteering many hours a week both in and outside of the boardroom. My full-time employment is with another nonprofit. I also regularly volunteer with two more nonprofits, and financially support the work of numerous others. I care deeply about the performance of each of these organizations. I am embedded in the nonprofit world and their ability to be effective impacts me as deeply as I hope to impact them.

I therefore have good reason to be passionate about any research related to the performance of nonprofits. My work as a board member has particularly affected my desire to research and understand board effectiveness and how it can be measured and improved. The assumptions that influenced this inquiry have developed out of my experience, and correspond with the theory presented previously. Not only are nonprofits a valuable component of society,

but many of them are lacking in effectiveness and are in need of valuable tools to help guide their improvement. My experience is congruent with research showing that board effectiveness is a critical component for organizational success, and therefore I believe there is great significance to determining the value of a self-assessment tool like the BPSAQ for nonprofit boards.

Overview of the Inquiry

In this chapter, I have introduced the readers to the prominence of the nonprofit sector, and the importance of evaluating organizational and board effectiveness. Although there are many tools that can be used for evaluation, the BPSAQ is a new instrument that is easily accessible online and is free to use. However, qualitative data on the value of this tool for those organizations that use it has not yet been explored, and this study fills that gap. I have presented the purpose statement for this inquiry as well as the central research questions that governed its methods. I have also situated myself, acknowledging my assumption that enhanced board performance will lead to improved organizational effectiveness.

In Chapter Two, I look further into nonprofit research and specify the need for a qualitative examination of the BPSAQ. Chapter Three is a description of the research design, methods, and analysis I used to conduct this evaluative study. In Chapter Four, I present the findings of this study, explaining the data with my narrative, but also providing both short and long quotations from the interviews, allowing the participants to speak to the reader with their own words. Chapter Five is a discussion of the findings, establishing the value of the perspectives collected and ultimately of the BPSAQ itself. That closing chapter also provides suggestions for future research and brings the inquiry to a close.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

In this section, I begin by explaining what nonprofit organizations are and what it is they do. I then argue why they require accountability and offer ways in which that can happen. After determining the value of self-assessment and looking at some of the available tools, I describe the BPSAQ and establish its place as a credible choice for nonprofit boards. I conclude by showing how this research helps contribute to the credibility of the BPSAQ and adds a valuable addition to nonprofit literature in general.

What are Nonprofit Organizations?

There are many kinds of organizations in the nonprofit sector. They include day-care centres, sports clubs, arts organizations, social clubs, private schools, hospitals, food banks, environmental groups, trade associations, places of worship, advocates for social justice, and groups that raise funds to cure diseases. They range from large and institutional bodies such as the International Red Cross to small non-formal associations. Some are entirely voluntary while others are made up of all paid staff and no volunteers, other than the board of directors.

Approximately 161,000 of these types of nonprofit and voluntary organizations were registered in Canada in 2003 (*Cornerstones of Community*, 2005). What they have in common is that “mission and values lie at the heart of [their] existence” (Murray, 2006, p. 4), their purpose is to serve the public, there is no profit flow to owners, and they “are required by law to have a board of directors” (p. 5).

Why Nonprofits Need Accountability

All nonprofit organizations must have a board, but the largest group of nonprofits, registered charities (while all charities are nonprofits, not all nonprofit organizations are charities), have the additional legal requirement that their board members must not be paid. However, despite not having the requirement, most of Canada’s nonprofits that do not have

charity status also have volunteer boards. Whether paid or not, the nonprofit board is legally accountable for the governance of the organization, ensuring that it is achieving its mission and is being run in a fiscally and legally responsible way.

The problem is, however, that as volunteers, board members often do not have the experience in organizational governance that is required and thus many boards experience difficulties in carrying out their duties. Commonly, there is confusion and conflict between board members and paid staff over who is responsible for what roles. Decades of studies on nonprofit effectiveness attest to these organizations regularly struggling because of many reasons, and board members will often admit a need for ways to improve and measure their effectiveness (Block, 2004; Broadbent, 1999; Green & Griesinger, 1996; Holland & Jackson, 1998; Masaoka, 2003). Public scandals as a result of these limitations have “fueled calls for increasing scrutiny of nonprofits’ performance, for tighter regulations, and for fewer tax exemptions” (Holland & Ritvo, 2008, p. 252).

Beyond issues intrinsic to nonprofit boards, the need for accountability arises from outside the organization as well. Increasingly, governments throughout the world are choosing to partner with nonprofit organizations to provide the delivery of public goods and services (Blankenburg, 2000; Brock, 2002; Hall & Kennedy, 2008; Rifkin, 2003). These organizations represent a low cost alternative for solving socio-economic problems. “The importance of accountability has increased as nonprofit organizations have gone beyond being private providers of public goods to become the provider of publicly funded public goods” (Candler & Dumont, 2010, p. 260). As organizations are called to be more accountable with this new form of participation, new governance structures to ensure compliance have also been manifested (Brock, 2002; Candler & Dumont, 2010; Chait et al., 2005; Hall & Kennedy, 2008).

The nonprofit sector has received pressure for accountability from non-governmental

fundings as well. With 161,000 nonprofit organizations registered in 2003 in Canada, and the amount only growing, competition for scarce resources increases each year, despite annual revenues beyond \$110 billion (*Cornerstones of Community*, 2005; Hall, 2009). The *Broadbent Report* emphasized the new challenges to accountability as it analyzed nonprofit organizations, stating, “Canadians... are looking more closely at how the voluntary sector works and how it spends its donated money” (Broadbent, 1999, p. 6).

Nonprofit Assessment

Recognizing the need for improved accountability and effectiveness, the challenge is how to assess nonprofits on these measures. Among others, Hall and Kennedy (2008) have pointed out that a central issue with nonprofit assessment is “a lack of consensus on which organizational characteristics are the most likely to correlate with effective program outcomes in specific areas” (p. 310). In fact, without a set of objective measures of effectiveness, some have suggested the only true appraisal is the crude reality of whether the organization continues to exist or not.

Within this reality of the unknown, numerous tools have been created to measure many different aspects of nonprofits, alongside normative practices such as mandated external financial audits. With no agreement on what constitutes nonprofit organizational effectiveness, one measure that has been suggested and regularly researched is the performance of the board of directors. Many researchers argue that the characteristics of a board are “among the most important indicators of organizational capacity” (Hall & Kennedy, 2008, p. 310).

Over the last 25 years, there has been a steady outpouring of books, articles, websites, and workshops aimed at telling those who provide leadership to boards how to do it better (Carver, 1997; Chait et al., 2005; Gill, 2005; Light, 2001; Masaoka, 2003). John Carver’s work “Boards that Make a Difference” and Peter Drucker’s “Managing the Nonprofit Organization” are two of the most popular. Over the same period, there has also appeared a much smaller body

of literature reporting on empirical research into why boards actually behave as they do and the extent to which this behavior affects the performance of the organization (Bradshaw et al., 1992; Brudney & Murray, 1998; Herman & Renz, 1998; Holland & Jackson, 1998; Nobbie & Brudney, 2003; Sonnenfeld, 2002). With a few notable exceptions, the prescriptive literature generally ignores the empirical literature and vice versa.

Value of Self-Assessment

Those who study organizational effectiveness tell us that the performance of a nonprofit organization is a subjective quality, and varies significantly with the perspective of person or tool doing the assessment (Green & Griesinger, 1996; Herman & Renz, 2004; 1998; Herman et al., 1996; Murray, 2009). Despite this, the "how to do it" writers continue to produce profuse amounts of material suggesting that there really is one best way to organize and manage a nonprofit board of directors. Very seldom is any effort made to examine how the diverse individuals, who sit on and interact with a board of directors, perceive that board. Confronted with a list of elements of board functioning, do they tend to have common perceptions of how the board is behaving or do they differ? Additionally, whether or not they see the board in the same way, do their perceptions of the board's effectiveness relate in any way to their beliefs about the effectiveness of the organization it governs.

Research studies from the last two decades have shown that boards of nonprofit organizations that take the time to regularly assess their own performance are more effective than those that do not. Often, board members themselves, and those who connect with the board on a regular basis, have many ideas about what is working and what might be done better. One of the best ways to tap the potential for board members and others to contribute to improving board performance is to have them complete a well designed and tested questionnaire, covering all facets of board performance. When summarized and analyzed, the results provide an excellent

basis for learning and board self-development.

Self-Assessment Tools

Two decades ago, Holland (1991) recognized the need for a tested and reliable self-assessment tool for boards to utilize. He found the self-help guidance that was made available to boards through the 1970s and 1980s was “based entirely upon individual experience and opinion” rather than empirical evidence, was mostly anecdotal in nature, and provided a “limited basis for understanding the problems or improving the practices of governance” (Holland, 1991, p. 26). He asserted that the resources available to nonprofit organizations offered “little help on how the board can assess its performance or take purposive action to become more effective as a group” (ibid.). In acknowledging that boards rarely have the ability or time to read these types of resources and use them to reflect on their own performance, he worked to design the first self-assessment questionnaire to be tested for validity and reliability. Through Holland’s research, he became confident that boards, especially ineffective ones, have a hard time critically assessing their own performance, even with his well-thought out tool. He recommended future research and development of self-assessment instruments that would utilize the valuable perspectives of board members and hopefully grow beyond the limitations he found.

Since Holland’s groundbreaking work, many have followed by creating their own board assessment tools. Jackson and Holland (1998) created a 65-question instrument called the Board Self-Assessment Questionnaire that focused on board practices. It was flawed in that participants expressed confusion with its measurement of six somewhat abstract competencies rather than more concrete categories already familiar with board members (Gill, Flynn, & Reissing, 2005). Three other prominent instruments are the National Center for Nonprofit Boards Questionnaire (1999), the Benchmarks of Excellence tool (Mollenhauer, 2000), and the Drucker Foundation Self-Assessment Tool (Drucker, 1998). None of these, however, have

generated validity data linking them with organizational effectiveness, nor do they provide norms in their feedback reports to aid in the interpretation of results.

Two other self-assessment tools, Gill's (2005) Governance Self-Assessment Checklist and the Urban Institute's National Survey of Nonprofit Governance, which is discussed in Ostrower (2007), are both comprehensive tools that have been tested for validity and reliability. However, they also have limitations. The survey that Ostrower studied only polled CEOs or Executive Directors of organizations, and Gill's checklist gathers information exclusively from board members and not other key stakeholders in the organizations, such as staff members or chief funders. All of the above instruments also only gather information at a single point in time, and have not looked at board effectiveness over time. Vic Murray of the University of Victoria (BC) and Yvonne Harrison of the University of Albany (NY), the creators of the Board Performance Self-Assessment Questionnaire (BPSAQ), believe theirs is the first tool that addresses all the needs and critiques described above (Harrison & Murray, 2010).

The Board Performance Self-Assessment Questionnaire

The BPSAQ is a new tool that represents a shift away from paper-based assessment of board performance to an online survey instrument, available at www.boardcheckup.com. It is available to be used free of charge by any nonprofit organization.

The BPSAQ as a research tool.

The BPSAQ is not simply an assessment tool, but has primarily been created as part of a research undertaking by Murray and Harrison, funded by the Institute of Nonprofit Studies at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. The tool itself is a theory based assessment of the characteristics of effective volunteer boards and provides a multidimensional view of effectiveness from the perspective of those who serve on, and have a stake in, the governance of a nonprofit organization.

It is being used as the primary instrument in a longitudinal study, with the goal of creating a statistical data set based on the responses of the hundreds of organizations that will use the tool. They believe the longitudinal nature and larger sample aspects of the study add considerable value to their research and will result in providing important information for nonprofit boards in developing their governance potential. They hope to answer the following questions in their research:

1. To what extent do those who serve on nonprofit boards and those they interact with have common perceptions of board performance?
2. To what extent are the factors known to influence the governance process related to perceptions of board governance effectiveness?
3. Are perceptions of board performance related to perceptions of organizational performance?
4. What accounts for similarities and differences in perceptions of board effectiveness?

The BPSAQ creators intend to report regularly on the progress of their research as they seek to answer important questions about perceptions of board and organizational effectiveness and the factors that influence them.

Development of the BPSAQ.

Along with being based on research regarding the characteristics of effective boards, the questionnaire is also a product of a pilot test of an earlier version which assessed perceptions of the effectiveness of local boards in the Seattle, Washington area in 2009 and early 2010. That study was conducted over an 18-month period in 2009-10 with 280 participants representing 42 local nonprofit boards (Harrison & Murray, 2009). The results of the pilot project showed a high degree of validity and reliability for the questionnaire they used, as measured against data obtained through observations of the boards involved as well as interviews with key leaders.

Post-survey feedback from participating boards suggested the results from the questionnaire accurately reflected organizational reality, and provided a valuable foundation from which to build greater board effectiveness and improve accountability.

Development of the online instrument took place over a six-month period starting in May 2010. Minor changes were made and only those components that were found to be valid and reliable indicators of effectiveness from the pilot test were incorporated. An additional issue that was addressed related to the most frequent complaint, that the questionnaire seemed to be overly negative in its phrasing of questions (Harrison & Murray, 2010). As shown in Figure 1, the developers of the BPSAQ added a “note” to their introductory message with the online version, suggesting board members come with a ‘health check-up’ attitude when answering the questionnaire.

Figure 1 – Health Check-up Note (from the BPSAQ Introduction)

Note: Try to think of this questionnaire in the same way you think of the one you get at a doctor’s office when you go for a checkup. You’ll recall that it contains a long list of possible health issues and asks you to check those that concern you so you and the doctor can discuss them. In the same way, this questionnaire provides the beginning of a health checkup for your board. The items included in it are issues raised by actual board members in many kinds of nonprofit organizations over the years. They are framed as statements of problems and you are asked to indicate to what extent problems like these exist in your organization. The fewer items you agree with, the more “healthy” you consider your board to be. When you do agree with one of the statements, you are not being critical of your board (just as checking “Do you get headaches?” on the doctor’s questionnaire does not mean you are somehow at fault). It merely indicates that this is a matter you think should be discussed.

From July to November 2010, the online version of the BPSAQ was active and undergoing its own pilot testing (Harrison & Murray, 2010). Not only has it remained accurate in assessing the effectiveness of boards, but users show favorable attitudes toward the design and ease of use of the instrument and a desire for future use. Unsolicited feedback has been enthusiastic and supportive, one Executive Director sharing that “I had feedback from our board

members via e-mail that the survey was excellent and had really made them think about issues that they had not considered before. In short, a big thumbs up!” (Bittner, 2010). Another shared in greater detail:

The survey and the system for collecting data were appreciated by our people, many of whom mentioned to me (unsolicited) that they thought it was a well-written, well-organized survey that covered the sorts of items that they thought were important to assess. The online format was easy to access and to complete and a number of people at our last meeting mentioned that it took them less than 15 minutes to complete, which they appreciated. Also, as the person who handled the coordinator role, I found that aspect of the system to be well designed and easy to manage (Martin, 2010).

The concern regarding negative questioning was diminished, but “there did remain a certain amount of dissatisfaction on the part of a few respondents” (Harrison & Murray, 2010, p. 10). This is an issue the developers suggest they continue to monitor and may address in the future.

The BPSAQ as an assessment tool.

The developers of the BPSAQ believe it provides a valuable accountability tool for volunteer boards of directors, particularly those that lack the skills, financial resources, and expertise to conduct reliable and valid self-assessments on their own (Holland, 1991). To utilize the online tool, a coordinator registers the organization by answering a few simple questions, taking just a few minutes to complete. The survey is made active within a day, and the coordinator is provided with an html link and a suggested email to send out to those the board wishes to participate in the evaluation.

Simply clicking on that link takes a board member to the introductory page for their organization’s survey, and from that point it is very easy to navigate through the process. The BPSAQ takes approximately fifteen to twenty minutes to complete and asks respondents to

indicate the extent to which the issues raised are perceived as existing in their own organization. It uses a four point Likert scale where 1 is “agree strongly” that the issue is a problem in the organization, 2 is “agree somewhat”, 3 is “disagree somewhat” and 4 is “disagree strongly” (please see Appendix 1 of Appendix A for a look at formatting of the questionnaire). Participants also have the option of “unsure” or “do not know” responses.

The BPSAQ asks a total of 83 questions (see Appendix C for the complete list of questions). It begins with 8 questions that ask about the individual’s role within the organization. Although these are personal in nature, including asking for gender and approximate age, no specific identifiers are collected from participants. There are 68 questions in the primary portion of the questionnaire, which are designed to assess the board’s effectiveness on nine different elements. These elements and questions are based on generally accepted "best practice" propositions that have been supported by prior research, including empirical studies on assessment tools (Gill, 2005; Herman & Renz, 2004; Holland, 1991; Murray, 2009; Paton, Foot and Payne, 2000). The nine categories of questions focus on issues related to:

1. The board’s overall role and basic board responsibilities – five questions
2. The board’s responsibilities for planning and policy oversight – nine questions
3. The board’s role in performance assessment – five questions
4. The board’s role in fundraising – three questions
5. The board’s formal structures – eleven questions
6. Board processes and meetings – eleven questions
7. The composition of the board and development of board members – six questions
8. The informal culture of the board – seven questions
9. Board leadership (e.g. board chair or executive director) – eleven questions

The instrument also includes an additional seven questions at the closing of the questionnaire regarding the individual's perception of the organization's overall effectiveness. These items are scored on a four point scale where 1 is "excellent", 2 is "good", 3 is "fair", and 4 is "poor."

Although the completed questionnaires are completely anonymous, by way of a login, the board's coordinator has access to a "dashboard" which provides a count of how many individuals have completed the survey for their organization. This provides a useful tool for knowing whether reminders are necessary to urge board members to complete the questionnaire. The developers of the BPSAQ suggest at least a 50% completion rate, though more is certainly recommended. When all of those intended to complete the tool have done so, or a time limit set by the board is reached, the coordinator manually closes the survey using a virtual button provided on the dashboard.

Results generated by the BPSAQ.

BPSAQ Final Report.

Once the survey is closed, the coordinator receives two reports electronically. The first is created automatically and appears immediately on the dashboard (see Appendix D for an anonymized sample). It is called the *BPSAQ Final Report* and provides a summary of the questionnaire results, including four key elements: the organization's overall effectiveness score; the top ten strengths and top ten challenges for effective board performance; an average score for each of the nine categories of questions; and an average discrepancy score for each of the nine categories.

After providing the response rate for the organization, the summary explains the overall score for the BPSAQ. The higher the average total score, with a possible range from 68 to 272, the greater the probability that the board is carrying out its governance function well. Along

with the numerical value, the *Final Report* offers a description of what that score most likely looks like for a board.

A valuable component of the *Final Report* is the summary of the top ten strengths of a board's performance, followed by the board's top ten challenges to effectiveness. The strengths are made up of the questions that had the greatest number respondents checking "disagree strongly," and conversely, the challenges are made up of the questions with the greatest number of "agree strongly" responses. These lists are important to consider as they highlight the areas that the board members felt most strongly about.

Of greater importance than the overall BPSAQ score are the scores obtained for the nine categories of questioning. It is likely for a board to score well in some of these areas, but have challenges in others. The scores are provided numerically, but also are ranked as being "a very serious problem," "a moderately serious problem," or having "few serious problems." Similarly to the overall score, each numerical figure is also provided a description of what that number most likely looks like for that category. For instance, to score a moderately serious problem in the category for the board's role in fundraising (falling within the six to nine range), the report suggests "the board is seen as either uncertain about its role in fundraising or there are problems in the way it carries out that role."

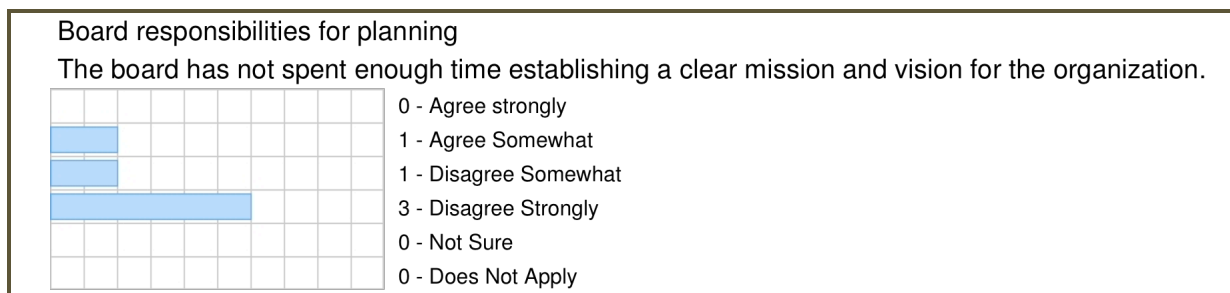
The last key piece of information the *Final Report* provides is a second score for each category that represents the discrepancy of responses. This number refers to how widely the perceptions of those responding differ from one another, with the option of measuring a very wide, moderate, or minimal range of perceptions. As will be explained for the *Summary of Responses Report*, these scores are critical for assessing the degree to which board members have shared expectations and feelings regarding board performance.

Along with the *Final Report*, the BPSAQ developers also provide a section titled “Where Do You Go From Here?” (see Appendix E). This is intended to offer suggestions for how the board could proceed with the results of the questionnaire and best make use of the information for achieving greater effectiveness in the governance process.

Summary of Responses Report.

The second report that is provided is called the *Summary of Responses*, and includes the actual distribution of responses for each of the 77 Likert scale questions. This item-by-item summary reports on the number and type of responses for each question. The sample in Figure 2 shows that out of five respondents, one individual agreed somewhat, one individual disagreed somewhat, and three individuals disagreed strongly. For this question, there was a relatively high level agreement and therefore minimal range of perceptions (for this sample organization, this question most likely appeared on the top ten strengths list explained in the previous section).

Figure 2 – *Summary of Responses* Sample



The developers suggest boards focus on questions with a broad range of responses, or overall agreement but the presence of ‘outliers,’ one response that seems to be in opposition to the majority. In order to ensure confidentiality, it is not possible to show the extent to which the perceptions of board members differed from those of staff or external stakeholders. However, the BPSAQ developers suggest that a serious issue for governance occurs when board members

and those they deal with have widely differing expectations of one another or how each other should operate. Therefore, paying attention to the discrepancy between responses is a critical part of the evaluation process.

This *Summary of Responses Report* requires the BPSAQ administrators to collate the responses manually and thus involves a delay of about a week. Therefore, from the point of registering the organization to the final results being delivered, the whole BPSAQ process can be completed within two weeks (if the board members complete the twenty minute questionnaire within one week). This is remarkably short for any group evaluation process, although it would take much more time and hard work on the part of the board to put the results to good use.

Value of Current Research

Nonprofit organizations perform numerous functions for the benefit of society. With an increasing number of public scandals that highlight nonprofit mismanagement, and issues intrinsic to voluntary nonprofit organizations, there has been a growing demand for accountability. In this setting, the need for performance evaluation is necessary for nonprofit boards.

Empirical studies have shown that boards that engage in the practice of assessment of their performance are more effective than those that do not (Brudney & Murray, 1998; Herman & Renz, 2004; Holland, 1991; Paton et al., 2000). Self-assessment surveys are one of the tools that can prove valuable, and the BPSAQ provides a simple evaluation for overall board performance that is easy for boards to access. This tool has been tested for reliability and validity, and post-survey feedback from participating boards in the pilot project suggested the results from the questionnaire accurately reflected organizational reality and were a valuable base from which to improve accountability and board effectiveness (Harrison & Murray, 2010; 2009).

The researchers who created the BPSAQ report that unsolicited feedback received from boards participating in the current version of the BPSAQ has been enthusiastic and supportive

(Harrison & Murray, 2010). One board said the results were very helpful in stimulating change and requested to participate again. Barbara Wright, the President for the Arboretum Foundation in Seattle, Washington, wrote, “the self-assessment exercise was incredibly thorough and professional and our organization has benefited greatly from this exercise. We gained invaluable knowledge on how to move our board forward” (Wright, 2010).

Gathering more of this type of data is what my study has hoped to accomplish. Although the BPSAQ had been previously tested quantifiably for reliability and validity, its impact, benefits, and limitations had not been studied qualitatively. By filling that void, I believe that my study has made numerous contributions that are practically, socially, and theoretically-oriented.

Practically, the organizations involved have received feedback reports on their board’s current performance. Each participant has not only gained knowledge of their specific board, but also grown in knowledge of what leads to increased board effectiveness in general. Increased personal and organizational knowledge, as well as the likely increased organizational effectiveness for each nonprofit involved, are all seen as contributions of this study.

Socially, the well-being and performance of nonprofits is of great importance. As explained earlier, nonprofit organizations perform many valuable functions of society. To increase our understanding of what leads to effective boards, and to determine if the BPSAQ is accurate for measuring such effectiveness and likely to lead toward enhanced board performance, are both of great value to our society.

Theoretically, this research adds to the expanding field of nonprofit research. The BPSAQ is not only used by boards to measure and improve their effectiveness, but it is also the primary research tool in a longitudinal study on nonprofit organizations across North America, and it has been in effect for less than one year. My study is the first to create qualitative evidence for

suggesting the value and benefit of this new assessment tool. This data is valuable to the scholarship surrounding nonprofit research and self-assessment of boards in particular, and has the potential to lead to further studies regarding the BPSAQ and its long-term impact for the organizations that make use of it.

Summary

In this chapter, I have described what the nonprofit sector is and described how these organizations are of value to society, fulfilling many social functions. In the past 25 years, the call for greater accountability and performance evaluation has been a growing concern for nonprofits, and I recounted the steady outpouring of books and resources that have aimed at guiding those who provide leadership to nonprofit boards. I also pointed out the mounting body of literature reporting on empirical research into why boards behave as they do.

I then explained how opportunities for a board to perform a self-assessment of its performance have shown to be valuable for the development of effective boards and successful organizations. I presented some of the self-assessment tools that exist, suggesting the weaknesses behind some, and why the BPSAQ may be a simple, but comprehensive evaluation for overall board performance that is worth examining in greater detail. I spent considerable time describing the development of the BPSAQ, including its previous and current use as a research tool. I explained how the current online version works, emphasizing the results that it provides.

By discovering how members of nonprofit boards who take part in the BPSAQ describe their experience of the tool, I explained how my research contributes in practical, social, and theoretical ways. In the following chapter I establish the context for my study, by presenting the methodology behind my inquiry.

Chapter Three – Methodology

*Reduced to its most essential elements,
research is a process of identifying something unknown
and then collecting data to make it known.*

Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996, p. 43)

In the current study, my intention was to *make known* how participants who took part in the BPSAQ described their experience of the tool and its value to the nonprofit boards for which they are members. In the following section, I will explain the process I used for accomplishing that purpose. I start by grounding my beliefs regarding knowledge and research within both the social constructivist and pragmatic paradigms. I then explain the strategy of inquiry, which can be characterized as a non-conforming summative evaluative study. I describe the participants who took part in the study, and then explain the research methods, including recruitment, data collection through interviews, and the process of data analysis. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the relevant ethical concerns related to the research and the demands for validity.

Statement of Researcher's Beliefs

In looking at board effectiveness, and as a lens through which to view research in general, I believe that knowledge is conjectural. Absolute truth can never truly be found because perception of reality is always held and created subjectively through individual experience. This is consistent with a social constructivist worldview, for which “meanings are varied and multiple” (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). Guba and Lincoln (1989) believe within the “minds of individuals” we find “multiple, often conflicting, constructions” or interpretations of experiences (Schwandt, 1994, p. 128). Thus, it has been my goal to seek out these varied perspectives

through numerous interviews in order to gain a breadth of information and perhaps “achieve a consensus” on the value of the BPSAQ (Schwandt, 1994, p. 128).

I also believe the pursuit of knowledge should not only be about seeking truth, but agree with Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) that one should also be able to “use results to bring about positive consequences” (p. 30). This is congruent with the pragmatic paradigm of research, which emphasizes effectiveness and produces action as a result of study and learning. The present research corresponds with that paradigm in that its central focus is a tool that intends to create positive change for the participating boards. However, that is not the only positive consequence of this research. By seeking to determine if the BPSAQ is valuable for the participating nonprofit organizations, I have provided further justification regarding whether this tool should be recommended for use by other organizations. Mertons (2005) suggests that within the pragmatic paradigm, “effectiveness is to be used as the criteria for judging value of research” (p. 27). I believe this inquiry supports the goal of effective research by using qualitative techniques (open-ended interview questions) to allow the participants to use their own language in assessing the BPSAQ.

Strategy of Inquiry

In establishing this research, one of the toughest questions to deal with was that of my research methodology of choice. This inquiry has elements that could situate it as phenomenological, grounded theory, or case study research. It presents as phenomenological inquiry because it seeks “to provide a description of human experiences as it is experienced by the person herself,” where the experience is the process of utilizing the BPSAQ (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96). However, although it fits this description, and assents to the method’s usual small number of subjects, it does not fit Moustakas’ (1994) assertion that

phenomenological research must involve prolonged engagement with participants in order to develop patterns of meaning.

Grounded theory is a strategy of inquiry in which there is no preconceived hypothesis, but rather derives its theory of a phenomenon from the views of participants. I believe this fits well with my current study, as my goal is to explore the perceptions of users of the BPSAQ, determining if and how they believe it is beneficial, if it has value for their organization, and what limitations the tool possesses. However, Charmaz (2006) argues that grounded theory involves multiple stages of data collection paired with analysis for the purpose of testing the developing theory. My research has time restraints that inhibit the opportunity for such an in depth investigation of the developing hypothesis.

Unable to find a suitable fit utilizing grounded theory, I turned my attention to the methodology of case study research. Gerring (2007) believes that practitioners of case study research “have difficulty articulating what it is they are doing, methodologically speaking,” and this was where I found myself (p. 7). Franklin Giddings in 1924 suggested that within case study methodology “we ascertain as completely as we can the number and variety of traits, qualities, habits, or what not, combined in a particular instance” (p. 94). My goal was to ascertain a deep understanding of the breadth of experience for users of the online BPSAQ tool. Unfortunately, Stake (1995), along with others, believes case study also requires in depth exploration over a sustained period of time, utilizing “multiple sources of information” (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). With my limitation of time, I could not afford a lengthy study involving a variety of data in order to effectively fit the methodology of case study research.

Confident that my inquiry was qualitative in nature, but struggling to find a specific methodology to guide me, I came across Patton’s *Qualitative Research and Evaluative Methods* (2002). He suggests that, “pragmatic and utilitarian frameworks can guide qualitative inquiry on

their practical and applied underpinnings without having to be attached to or derived from a theoretical tradition” (p. 145). Essentially, “one might conduct interviews... to answer concrete program and organizational questions without working” from a specific methodology or “making a paradigmatic or philosophical pledge of allegiance” (p. 145). As explained above, my philosophical beliefs about research are based around social constructivism, which leads me to qualitative methods, and pragmatism, which asserts that research should be practical and “bring about positive consequences” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, p. 30). Knowing my intentions for the study, and based on Patton’s (2002) argument, I need not feel restricted to choosing one specific methodology to fall in line with its constructs.

Therefore, my strategy of inquiry for this study was not guided by a major qualitative methodology, but rather was simply an evaluation of the BPSAQ utilizing qualitative interview methods. Through previous evaluation, using both quantitative and qualitative methods, the tool has been proven to be reliable in accurately assessing board effectiveness, but it has not been evaluated for whether these accurate assessments are indeed beneficial for the board. This evaluative inquiry was designed to begin gathering qualitative data to assess this concern.

One could argue that during the pilot project in the Seattle area as described in Chapter Two, the BPSAQ has already undergone summative evaluation, which serves the “purpose of rendering an overall judgment about the effectiveness of a program, policy, or product for the purpose of saying... it is effective and, therefore, should or should not be continued” (Patton, 2002, p. 218). Summative evaluation usually relies on quantitative measures, only using qualitative data to “add depth, detail, and nuance to quantitative findings” (p. 220). I believe my research provides that depth and nuance, by generating qualitative data, and strengthens the already established argument for the continuation of the BPSAQ as a valuable tool for assessing nonprofit board effectiveness.

Participants

Knowing my strategy of inquiry, it was time to begin the research. This study did not include, nor did it intend to include a representative sample of nonprofit organizations. It involved three nonprofit organizations working on Vancouver Island in the Canadian province of British Columbia. I delimited my research to just three organizations for the sake of time and because the qualitative approach does not lend itself to effective generalizability, and thus a large sample was not necessary. At the commencement of this inquiry, I invited a number of organizations to take part in the research, and the following were chosen not because of any significant features, but rather for their expressed interest in participating:

1. The Music for Youth Works Society is a relatively new nonprofit organization that provides music mentorship for children and youth with musical interest who are at risk because of social or financial reasons. It operates primarily in Victoria's inner-city.
2. Lambrick Park Church is a suburban church in Saanich, part of the Greater Victoria region. It has been operating since 1965 and serves approximately 1000 congregants.
3. The Island Christian Camping Society operates Camp Imadene, a year-round camping ministry based in Mesachie Lake, about one hour and thirty minutes north west of Victoria. Camp Imadene has well over 1000 children, teens, and adults attend its camps each year and has been in operation for 85 years.

From these organizations, each board member and all individuals who regularly meet with the board were asked to be a participant in the first stage of the research process. Although the literature shows that nonprofit board members are most likely to be predominately white males, at least upper-middle class, employed, and over the age of thirty-five (Ostrower, 2007), the participants in this study have no salient characteristics except that they are adults who have strong relationships with the boards of these organizations. There were twenty-eight people in

total who were invited to participate in this first stage of research, which involved completing the BPSAQ tool on behalf of their organization. Eight individuals were not able to participate, leaving 20 who did complete the tool. The BPSAQ suggests that a minimum ratio (50%) of board members complete the online questionnaire to ensure accurate results, and each organization was able to reach this minimum level without concern.

For the second stage of the research, each organization appointed two to three well-informed leaders to complete interviews. Again, I did not attempt to get a representative sample of nonprofit board members, but rather hoped to interview key informants from each organization. The interview participants held positions such as board chair, executive director, secretary, or treasurer. The salient characteristic is that they have vast or specialized knowledge of their organization and can therefore provide valuable insight into the potential benefits and impact the BPSAQ may provide for their boards.

There were seven individuals who participated in the interview stage of the research, three members each from two of the boards, and one from the third. The reasoning for only one interview participant from the third organization is twofold, and is aligned with Janesick's (2000) assertion that "decisions made during the study usually concern use of time, participants' issues, and researcher issues because working in the field is unpredictable" (p. 387). One reason was indeed associated to time. Specifically, I was unable to arrange an appointment with a potential participant within a reasonable timeframe because of circumstances related to that individual. The second reason arose out of my concern that this organization was not as invested in the BPSAQ process and may not use the results after I learned they had contracted a consultant for board help. Although this decision is seen as a valuable step for boards to take in order to create change, I believed the perceptions of the tool held by those key leaders could be significantly different compared to board members of more invested organizations.

Regardless of this concern, I believe all seven of the interview participants were committed to the process, provided valuable insight, and thus my analysis includes data from each of the interviews. In the results section, I use pseudonyms for the interviewees and do not distinguish which organization they are a part of or which position they hold. The assumed gender for the pseudonyms I chose may also be different from that of the original participant. I have chosen to take these steps not only to ensure the confidentiality of the participants, but also because the sample size in this study is far too small to draw conclusions regarding how males, females, or individuals who hold certain roles with the board view the BPSAQ and its impact.

Methods

BPSAQ phase.

After receiving ethics approval, I began my evaluative study of the BPSAQ in January of 2011. Using already established connections, I approached key leaders of nonprofit organizations through the use of emails, phone calls, and personal conversations, to invite their board of directors to participate in the study. I met with a number of boards, explained the proposed research and the consent procedures, invited them to participate, and gave them the chance to discuss their involvement privately. Three organizations were eventually chosen, and each board member was asked to complete the online BPSAQ for their individual board. They could do so on their own time, but within a two-week period. After that time, and with sufficient response, I closed the online instrument and received electronic copies of the two reports explained in Chapter Two for each organization. These reports were sent out by email to each participant for their respective organization.

Interview phase.

During recruitment, each board chose key leaders that were to participate in the primary stage of the proposed research, the interview phase. I was hoping to interview two or three key

leaders per organization, specifically the board chair, the staff leader (executive director or otherwise), and any other individual who had unique and extensive knowledge of the organization. As explained earlier, I chose to interview multiple participants from multiple organizations in order to gather information from varied experiences of the tool. By doing this, I created the opportunity to “achieve a consensus” on the value of the BPSAQ, which would carry more empirical weight than simply gathering anecdotal information from a few sources (Schwandt, 1994, p. 128).

I chose interviews as the method for data collection because they best fulfill the need for the type of information I wanted to obtain; qualitative data that I could “not easily gather elsewhere” or in other ways (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003, p. 47). Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) suggest there are three main possibilities for interview structure, and I utilized a semi-structured approach. This means that some questions were predetermined, but were primarily open-ended, providing sufficient flexibility to allow the interviewee an opportunity to shape the conversation. “The goal [was] to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience” with the BPSAQ (Seidman, 1991, p. 9). Therefore, although predefined areas for discussion were based around the research questions, “the format and ordering of the questions [were] informed by the ongoing responses of the interviewee” and new questions would emerge to help gain a deeper understanding of the participant’s perceptions (Seidman, 1991, p. 45). Figure 3 presents the interview questions that were predetermined, but also a sample of the questions that arose from the individual interviews.

As you can see from Figure 3, I started by asking for a general description of their experience utilizing the tool, and from there, attempted to fulfill the research questions by learning the participant’s perspectives on the benefits, limits, and potential impact of the BPSAQ. The interviews ranged in time from twenty minutes to over one hour. With permission

from the participants, each was recorded using an MP3 recorder. The interviews took place in locations chosen by the participants, conducive to providing a quiet and confidential atmosphere.

Figure 3 – Interview Questions

<p>Predetermined Questions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you feel about your experience with the BPSAQ? • What do you think of the results of the BPSAQ? • What do you think was the most valuable part of the experience? • What is your opinion of the challenges identified in the feedback reports? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have an opinion as to if the board will address them? • What is your opinion regarding any potential long-term changes emerging from your completing the BPSAQ? • What do you think of the actual tool itself and its reports? Was there anything lacking or any suggestions you could make? • What is your opinion of potentially completing the BPSAQ again in the future? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under what circumstances might you consider it? • What is your opinion of the suggestions the reports made for “Where Do You Go From Here?”
<p>Sample of Emerging Questions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were your feelings while you were completing the online tool? • What reaction did you have after you received the results in the reports? • Do you believe that others on your board share that opinion? • Was that something you had knowledge of before you took part in the BPSAQ? • Have you ever expressed those opinions before? • Can you explain to me what you mean by that? • Is there any reason why that would be helpful/hurtful? • Is that a result of the strength of the tool, or the strength of your board? • Was there something you were hoping the BPSAQ would cover, but didn't? • How was this tool similar or different to other evaluative tools you have used? • What is your opinion regarding having an outside person help your board with the results?

After meeting with each of the key leaders, I created anonymized transcripts utilizing the electronic audio files. Upon completing the transcripts, I utilized one of Gibbs' (2007) procedures for increasing reliability by listening through the interviews again while reading the text I had created, making needed corrections. I listened through the recordings one last time while making notes to record tone, inflection, and any other point that would assist in data analysis. After this, the electronic audio files were deleted to respect the need for confidentiality. I then sent the completed transcripts via email to each interviewee for the purpose of a "member check to determine the accuracy" of the data and increase the internal validity of the research (Creswell, 2009, p. 191). The goal was to gain further clarity and correct any misinterpretations in the transcripts through a conversation with the participant. A few corrections were made, but the majority of the interviewees were content with their transcripts without needing changes.

After receiving confirmation on the transcripts, I assigned pseudonyms to each of the interviewees and began my data analysis.

Data analysis.

Rubin and Rubin (1995) note, "data analysis is the final stage of listening to hear the meaning of what is said" (p. 226). Therefore, I analyzed the interview data for the purpose of discovering the meanings and themes of the participants' experiences with the BPSAQ. My first step was to read through each transcript, highlighting any notable quote, phrase or word. I used a highlighting system where different colours correlated with the main research questions (benefits, limitations, and potential impact), and additional colours were used to denote items of interest that did not fit into any of the central themes.

Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) suggest that data analysis involves "grouping the responses to each question from all interviews to make comparison between respondents."

However, because I used a semi-structured interview approach, some of the questions I asked were unique for particular participants. I also did not plan to construct the results section based around the interview questions. Therefore, after highlighting key quotations, I went through the transcripts again, and created units of general meaning. Each quote or phrase was rewritten to condense what the participant said while still capturing the meaning. For example, in Suzy's interview, her response to the first question, "how did you feel about your experience with the BPSAQ?" was transcribed:

I might have felt a little strongly, by doing this. I actually felt adverse to it. It made me, well, it got my guard up. I think because the way they worded the questions. I'm a fairly positive person and I figure... and maybe it's not healthy but, my idea of nonprofit is that we're doing it out of the goodness of our hearts or, we're going into it, it should be fairly positive. Even if there is criticism, it should come from a positive way and it was just... My emotional gut reaction was "why are all the questions so negative?" And I felt like I was fighting it. Sometimes I got so caught up on what felt to be a negative question that it was hard to answer the actual question. So, I mean that's just me and maybe it's not the most intellectual way to go about it but it made me frustrated.

This quote contains valuable depth and feelings, but for the needs of data analysis, it had to be broken down into units of general meaning that I could compare to other interviews. Suzy's paragraph was broken down into the following general meaning units: (a) emotional negative reaction to BPSAQ, (b) confusion with questions, and (c) frustrated by the tool. I followed this same pattern for each of the transcripts.

After creating a list of each participant's units of general meaning, I gathered them together into a master list. I grouped those units that were repeated by numerous interviewees,

and these became the common themes that I developed the results section around. I also included units that were not repeated but seemed particularly valuable to consider. Each common theme was categorized under one of the main research questions, which became the central themes of the findings. After gathering together the common themes, I created a table that listed each participant's perspectives that arose during their interviews (see Tables 1, 2, and 3 in Chapter Four).

At this stage of the analysis, I realized that I had a valuable tool for capturing more data. Using the table of common themes, I created a *BPSAQ Experience Questionnaire* (see Figure 4) and emailed this to each interview participant. I considered sending it to each of the 20 individuals who had completed the BPSAQ, but believed this would be a breach of my ethics approval. Although I had not communicated this step in my ethics proposal, I believe it was justified as a form of member checking with those I interviewed.

This *BPSAQ Experience Questionnaire* (BEQ) was valuable because it allowed me to collect data on the areas I had not discussed with certain participants. This was needed because the interviews were guided by participant responses and therefore each was unique. It also provided a way to confirm the interpretation of meaning I placed on what the interviewees said, and therefore offered a "validity check" (Hycner, 1985, p. 291). To strengthen the reliability of this check, I spoke with a few of the participants after receiving their completed questionnaire regarding certain discrepancies that were confusing. Unfortunately, I was unable to devote more time to this unexpected stage of the study, which I discuss more in Chapter Five as I make recommendations for future research.

Ethical Concerns

This inquiry posed few ethical concerns of importance. Creswell (2009) states that researchers must "not put participants at risk" and must "respect vulnerable populations" (p. 89).

Figure 4 – BPSAQ Experience Questionnaire

Central Themes	Common Themes	Agree?
Benefits of the BPSAQ	Quick to complete	
	User-friendly	
	Questions were fair, reasonable, and easy to answer	
	Content of questions was challenging	
	Asked important questions that haven't been asked in a long time	
	"Health Check-up" paragraph in introduction was helpful preparation	
	Comprehensive coverage of board performance	
	Valuable outlet for quieter voices on board	
	Valuable for stepping back and seeing the big picture	
	Highlighted previously 'unsaid' beliefs/feelings	
	Straightforward results	
	Accurate results with few surprises	
	Results provided new information	
	Highlighted new/needed/important areas for discussion & change	
	Item-by-Item Summary was particularly valuable/insightful	
	Results especially valuable/informative for new board members	
	Results showed how people's expectations influenced responses	
	Results identified "elephant(s) in the room"	
	Strengthened resolve regarding particular issues/needs	
	Valuable for growing in self-awareness as individuals and as a board	
Suggestions for how to use results are helpful		
No NEED for outside person to help with using results		
Healthy and useful tool overall		
Limitations & Concerns	Negative question phrasing was confusing	
	Negative question phrasing was emotionally difficult	
	No or limited new information gained through results	
	Results affirm negative perspective and could be harmful	
	Finding enough time to discuss results as a board will be difficult	
	Not enough guidance on how to find help with addressing challenges	
	Still NEED an outside person to help deal with results	
	Need different streams/questionnaires for different types of boards	
	More useful for larger boards	
	More useful for older organizations	
Potential for Organizational Change	Board WILL discuss results	
	Board will PROBABLY discuss results	
	Board will LIKELY NOT discuss results	
	Results require separate board meeting for discussion to be effective	
	Confident that ALL identified challenges will be address by the board	
	Only SOME challenges will be addressed because of time concerns	
	IF TIME IS TAKEN, confident that positive change would result	
	Confident BPSAQ will lead to positive change	
	Results will help to prioritize board tasks	
	Discussion of individual responses should lead to shared expectations	
	Results will implicitly impact people's perceptions/opinions	
Future BPSAQ use important to measure success of board change		

As explained above, the participants in this study were competent adults and did not represent a vulnerable population. They were also not asked to do anything beyond completing a survey regarding their feelings surrounding their nonprofit board and then revealing their opinions of that survey. However, steps were still taken to ensure ethical concerns were addressed.

As part of the University of Victoria's Human Research Ethics Board approving the research, two separate consent forms (please see Appendices A and B) that explain processes such as informed consent and right to withdrawal were created for all those completing the BPSAQ and for the interview participants.

Regarding the data, slight concerns of confidentiality and anonymity are present. Because the research examines three organizations' experience with the BPSAQ, the greatest risk for confidentiality comes from within those organizations themselves. Some of the participants may have been "curious about what another research participant said," so I was intentional to not discuss individual responses with any of the interviewees (Palys & Atchison, 2008, p. 76). Palys and Atchison (2008) suggest significant steps need to be taken to ensure confidentiality only if "embarrassment or harm" would be caused to participants if their information were to be released (p. 76). However, the risk is minimal, considering the interview questions (see Figure 3) are not of a personal nature and are intended to reveal nothing beyond the participant's view of the BPSAQ and its value to their organization, meaning significant steps were not required.

The biggest concern in terms of ethics lies within my own conflict of interest. During the time of the research, I was a board member for one of the participating organizations, the Island Christian Camping Society. As the researcher, I was interested in including the board I sit on in the study partly because I think utilizing the BPSAQ tool would be valuable for any and every board, including my own, but also because I believe acting as a participant would give me additional insight regarding the BPSAQ.

However, I have not included my own perceptions of the tool in the results, doing my best to use the phenomenological stance of “bracketing” where I attempt to put my own beliefs and assumptions aside (Sokolowski, 2000). Holding to the tenets of social constructivism, I do realize that complete neutrality can never be a reality, as our minds are interpreting and forming judgments as we construct knowledge. Therefore, “complete bracketing is impossible to achieve” and to suggest would ignore “the contextualized nature of human understanding” (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997).

Regarding the board I am a part of, to ensure a conflict of interest did not arise, I excluded myself from the board’s discussion regarding our participation in the study. Palys and Atchison (2008) argue, “ethics problems arise when the power differential between researcher and participant is considerable,” and I have no perceived power over any of the individuals that participated in the study, including those that serve on the board for the Island Christian Camping Society (p. 72).

Validity

Kvale (1996) suggests the validity of qualitative research rests with “issues of truth and knowledge” (p. 236). McNiff (1986) argues, “scientific validity is essentially a matter of what people believe to be true, useful, and in their personal interest.... Validity and truthfulness relate to the ability of the researchers to convince their audiences” (p. 286). Janesick (1994) states, “validity in qualitative research has to do with description and explanation, and whether or not a given explanation fits a description. In other words, is the explanation credible?” (p. 216).

Essentially, the proof of validity within a qualitative study can only be assessed by the reader. At the conclusion of this report, are you convinced of my argument? Are you convinced by how I have interpreted the participant’s words into meanings? Asking Janesick’s (1994)

question, is my explanation credible? Although only the reader can answer these questions, I believe I have established sufficient evidence to ensure the answer to each is “yes.”

As explained above, one distinct step I took toward increasing validity was to employ two types of “member checking to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings” (Creswell, 2009, p. 191). The first was letting the participants review their transcripts to correct any errors or clarify their opinions. The second was through the use of the BEQ that asked the participants to check off all of the common themes for which they agreed. This was then compared to their interview responses for further clarification.

Another validity strategy Creswell (2009) suggests is to “use rich, thick descriptions to convey the findings” (p. 191). In Chapter Four, I have presented the results using a mix of short and long quotations from the interviews, attempting to let the participants speak for themselves as often as possible, enabling the reader to make their own judgments and accurately assess my explanations of perspectives. Creswell also explains that providing “negative or discrepant information that runs counter to the themes” suggests that the researcher is not hiding any of the information in order to communicate a pre-established argument (p. 192). I have done this on a number of occasions wherever contrary perspectives arose from the interviews.

Regarding the issues of reliability and replicability, the study is limited. In order to strengthen the reliability of a qualitative inquiry, multiple researchers are necessary to cross-check each stage of data analysis. Being a sole researcher thus puts limitations on what I can claim, however I have shown diligence by listening through the interviews at least three times while creating and checking the transcripts for accuracy, before sending them to the participants themselves for checking as well. The ability to replicate this study will be impossible as it is similar to a case study approach, and deals with particular cases that only exist at this point in time. Personal interpretation by the researcher of interview responses will also affect the results,

thus impacting the replicability of the study. For these reasons and more, qualitative research rarely claims to be replicable.

A final issue related to validity is the generalizability of the research. Again, the goal of generalization is not common for qualitative inquiries, since the intent is not to generalize findings to individuals, places, or experiences outside of those under study (Gibbs, 2007). In fact, instead of generalizability, particularity is the goal of qualitative research (Greene, 2007). Therefore, my research is not intended to provide data that is generalizable to a wider scope, which is why I explained in my section on participants that it was reasonable for me to delimit my study to just seven interview participants representing three nonprofit organizations.

Summary

This chapter has introduced the readers to the context of this study, beginning with my own beliefs regarding how knowledge is created and should be pursued. I explained how I came to acknowledge that my inquiry was an evaluative study, with similarities to other methodologies but not quite fitting any one theoretical approach. After describing my participants, I presented the methods of study, which include: the invitation of nonprofits to utilize the BPSAQ, interviews of key leaders within those organizations regarding their perspective of the tool, and the data analysis by which I interpreted those interviews. I have explained the ethical concerns that related to this study, emphasizing my own role as a participant-user of the BPSAQ with my board, and the steps I took to restrict possible conflicts of interest. I concluded with a discussion of the limitations to validity, reliability, replicability, and generalizability for this study.

In the next chapter, I present the findings of the study, which are grounded in the research questions and formed by the strategies explained above.

Chapter Four – Findings of the Study

In the previous chapter, I explained my methods for completing the research. In this chapter, I report on the findings of my study. Within these results, I have chosen to not present each participant's perceptions as a whole, but rather to weave pieces of the interviews together, framed by the common themes that have arisen. Much like narrative inquiry, which attempts to restory the experiences of individuals by combining "the views from the participant's life with those of the researcher's life in a collaborative narrative" (Creswell, 2009, p. 13), I have (re)presented the interviewees' experiences alongside one another to create a grand narrative of how the BPSAQ is perceived. This presentation will be aided by my interpretation and rationale of how the individual comments link together to create valuable insight into the value of the BPSAQ for nonprofit boards.

I have chosen to build the central themes of the results around the research questions. I begin with the perceived benefits of the BPSAQ, focusing on the use of the tool, the line of questioning, the usefulness of results, and the overall value to nonprofit boards. I then move to the limitations and concerns that were experienced by the users of the questionnaire, emphasizing the negative phrasing of questions, the potential for the tool to effectively act alone, and suggestions for how it could be improved. I move on to the participants' perceptions regarding the likelihood the results will be addressed by their boards, the potential for change, and their feelings about whether they would choose to use the tool again. I conclude with a discussion of the results from the *BPSAQ Experience Questionnaire* (Figure 4).

Benefits of the BPSAQ

The overwhelming feedback from the interviews was that the BPSAQ was appreciated and found to be useful. Only a small number of participants had any major concerns, and most valued the results and were grateful for the opportunity to complete the tool. Robert stated, "it is

a healthy tool” and “actually really liked it.” Matthew “found it very useful” and Ian agreed, stating, “I think the tool was useful. I think it hit most of the nails, if not all the nails on the head. I think it was a fair process and a useful tool.”

The common themes that arose during the interviews regarding the benefits of the BPSAQ were that it was easy to use, asked valuable questions, provided accurate but constructive results, and had value in a variety of ways for the nonprofit boards that participated. These are the common themes that I have used to organize the following sections. I have also included a complete list of the common themes I discovered through the interviews in Table 1, indicating which participants expressed each feeling or opinion.

Table 1 – Interview Responses Regarding Benefits of the BPSAQ

Central Theme	Common Themes	Robert	Suzy	Kevin	Julia	Ian	Kate	Matthew
Benefits of the BPSAQ	Quick to complete			⊙	⊙			⊙
	User-friendly				⊙	⊙		
	Questions were fair, reasonable, and easy to answer	⊙		⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	
	Content of questions was challenging		⊙		⊙			⊙
	Asked important questions that haven't been asked in a long time				⊙			⊙
	“Health Check-up” paragraph in introduction was helpful preparation		⊙		⊙			
	Comprehensive coverage of board performance	⊙		⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
	Valuable outlet for quieter voices on board			⊙		⊙		
	Valuable for stepping back and seeing the big picture	⊙			⊙		⊙	⊙
	Highlighted previously ‘unsaid’ beliefs/feelings	⊙	⊙	⊙		⊙		⊙
	Straightforward results			⊙	⊙			
	Accurate results with few surprises	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
	Results provided new information				⊙	⊙	⊙	
	Highlighted new/needed/important areas for discussion & change	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙			⊙
	Item-by-Item Summary was particularly valuable/insightful		⊙		⊙	⊙		
	Results especially valuable/informative for new board members		⊙	⊙	⊙			
	Results showed how people’s expectations influenced responses					⊙		⊙
	Results identified “elephant(s) in the room”	⊙						⊙
	Strengthened resolve regarding particular issues/needs	⊙					⊙	⊙
	Valuable for growing in self-awareness as individuals and as a board					⊙		⊙
	Suggestions for how to use results are helpful					⊙	⊙	⊙
No NEED for outside person to help with using results			⊙	⊙	⊙			
Healthy and useful tool overall	⊙					⊙	⊙	

Ease of the tool.

The BPSAQ was designed to be an easy-to-use and quick assessment tool, so it is no surprise that the participants found that to be true. The information provided at www.boardcheckup.com suggests it takes approximately twenty minutes to complete the questionnaire, but most of the users suggested it took shorter. Kevin said, “it didn’t take me as long as you said it would. I tried to do it thoroughly, but the questions are all fairly easy to answer, and I went through it quickly.” Matthew agreed, explaining that “the amount of time it took was not excessive.” These findings support the unsolicited feedback received during the pilot testing of the online BPSAQ between July and November 2010, where users of the tool suggested it only took them fifteen minutes to complete (Harrison & Murray, 2010).

Participants did not simply find the tool to be quick, but also easy to work through. Ian said that “overall, it was very smooth, it was very user-friendly.” Responding to the format of the tool, Julia stated:

It was relatively smooth. I found as I was clicking through the questionnaire, it was relatively easy for me to move through the questions... I think that having the potential titles or the groupings of areas to organize my thoughts as I was answering the question was valuable... The way the information was gathered, [it] seemed straightforward to me.

Along similar lines, Robert added that he found the questions and the format of the tool to be comfortable.

Content of questions.

To know that the tool is comfortable to use and can be completed in a short period of time is valuable, but gaining insight into users’ perceptions of the actual questions has more significance. Kate “thought their questions were relevant,” and Ian added that he “found the

questions fair [and] easy to answer.” Not only did Julia find the BPSAQ process smooth, but also found that it “asked good questions,” and later added:

[T]he survey asked the type of questions that I think it’s useful for a board to spend time with. There were questions there that I thought, “ya, of course we should be asking ourselves that question,” but in the years I’ve been on the board we haven’t spent the time to answer those types of specific questions.

This sentiment that the questions asked were not only fair, but also important to consider was a common thread among most of the interviews. Although a member of a different organization, Matthew agreed with Julia in her belief that the questions asked were ones often neglected, saying that the BPSAQ “asked some good probing questions that as a board we probably haven’t thought through recently or even for a very long time, to say that these are things we need to address.”

Another key aspect regarding the content of the questionnaire is whether it was comprehensive enough to satisfy the users. Although there were a few suggestions for areas that could have received additional attention, which I offer in the section below on limitations, none of the participants felt strongly that anything was missing. All of their suggestions were only made as I encouraged them to think of items they would have appreciated seeing in the results, with none of them previously feeling that an area was missed. Although imploring participants to explore what questions might be missing could be considered in opposition of true open-ended question interviewing, and certainly would contradict the methodology of phenomenology, me needing to do it in order to elicit a response suggests the true comprehensiveness of the BPSAQ.

The majority of the responses to my questioning about limitations were similar to Ian, who said, “I think it was a very full survey, address[ing] everything I would want to see in a

survey.” Julia said, “there weren’t whole topics that to me were missing.” Kevin summarized the tool’s comprehensive nature very well:

In terms of areas of board performance that it addressed, I think it covered everything. It covered everything that I would want to talk about. It went from personal relationships to overall governance of the board. Financial matters to interpersonal. There’s nothing really left out, and if we want to discuss any of those areas, it will bring up areas of discussion.

As is shown in Table 1, for the statement *comprehensive coverage of board performance*, I interpreted the interviews of six participants as suggesting that they believed the BPSAQ was indeed comprehensive. The only participant not listed is Suzy, who did not disagree, but rather simply made no mention of this issue. However, in completing the follow-up questionnaire I created, she did in fact agree with the statement, and therefore each of the participants I interviewed expressed satisfaction with the content of the questions.

Benefits of the results.

Believing the tool to be comfortable and competent in its dealing with the subject matter does not guarantee that it will provide useful results. The following section deals with BPSAQ users’ perceptions in regards to how beneficial the results are to the individuals and boards who complete the tool. I begin by providing evidence that the users’ believed the results were accurate, then discuss its value in providing new perspective, and close with the value that the participants found in the *Summary of Responses Report*.

Accuracy.

A necessary aspect of any tool is that it does what it says it will do. In regards to the BPSAQ, it needs to provide an accurate reading of the overall performance of the board and its effectiveness in the nine categories that have been highlighted as necessary for successful

nonprofits. In every stage of development of the BPSAQ, it has proven itself to offer a reliable picture of board performance, and in this study, there was no difference.

Each participant viewed the tool as generally confirming their beliefs of the board on which they serve. “I think it identified things quite accurately,” suggested Matthew. Robert was more emphatic, saying that the results “didn’t surprise [him] at all, none whatsoever.” In fact, multiple participants used the word “surprise” to equate their feelings: “there wasn’t anything in those ones that was a big surprise to me” (Julia), “I felt there were no surprises in it” (Suzy), and “I was not surprised with those results” (Kate). Ian was not as absolute, but maintained the general trend by stating, “most of these challenges confirm my viewpoints... I would agree with the majority of the challenges and the strengths [that were identified].”

One issue that may be of concern is whether a tool that provides no surprises is really worth the effort of using. Although maintaining agreement regarding the tool not providing “anything that [he] was surprised by,” Kevin was not as satisfied as the others. He questioned whether the tool was necessary because the results told him “mostly things [he] already knew.” He did offer a suggestion for how this might be due to the strength of his organization rather than the tool’s limitation:

Since we’re a small board and we all know each other really well up to this point. We’re all friends... outside of board meetings and we have good relationships with each other. We’ve been generally good so far in knowing where we are at.

Suzy expressed this same concern, suggesting “anything could have done” what the BPSAQ did in informing their board of what they already knew, however, she added that it was “very valuable” to know that what you thought to be true is actually true. Furthermore, she said since “I felt there was no surprises in it, [it] was good to know that we are all on the same page.” So it seems having no surprises in the results can be considered either a positive or a negative aspect

of the BPSAQ, but Kevin did realize, at least “that means it’s doing its job well.” For a free online tool that takes less than twenty minutes for each individual to complete, that could be considered remarkable.

Providing new information and perspective.

Although each participant suggested the results had no surprises, most did confirm that they learned new information or at least that the results highlighted important points for the board to consider. Ian drew attention to the fact that the BPSAQ allows for everyone to contribute to the results. “There are a few people on the board that aren’t terribly outspoken, whereas some are more outspoken so you always know how they feel. I think this allowed everyone the opportunity to speak, and that is good and positive.” He emphasizes that a new voice to a conversation can change the outcome, and therefore finally allowing some people the chance to share their opinion is a benefit of the BPSAQ. Suzy also acknowledged the particular insight that certain individuals may have by sharing that completing the tool was “very useful this time around because we had a couple new people, so when it talked about training board members, [their opinion] was good to see.”

Regarding those newer members, even those who stated they did not really learn anything new realized the benefit of the results for those who had recently started working with the board. Kevin may have expressed disappointment with not learning new information, but he acknowledged the BPSAQ would be valuable for “people who are not as in touch.” Continuing, he added, “we have a couple newer board members, so they might have very different thoughts on it and to become aware of this is good.” Julia told me “I’m one of the people that has been on that board the longest, and so some of these things were intuitive to me,” but like Kevin, also asked “if people who have been on the board for a shorter period of time would have been surprised by those [results] or not.”

For some, they simply gained a new perspective of the board or the relationships within it. Kate said, “what it confirmed for me was that I’m not the only one that thinks that way, so that [was] new.” Expressing new knowledge gained through the results, Julia states:

There are areas where it’s clear we don’t have consensus or agreement, and I wouldn’t have necessarily known that we didn’t have consensus on some of those things. And I think that that gets back to that the questions there are good questions. They’re questions that as I read them, it’s clear to me that we should ask those questions. But they haven’t been asked, and as a result, there’s interesting information there; information that I wouldn’t have necessarily anticipated.

Many of the new perspectives learned by those I interviewed were gained through the *Summary of Responses Report*.

Value of the Summary of Responses Report.

As one of the two reports provided by the BPSAQ, the *Summary of Responses* provides detailed information regarding individual responses to questions. As shown in Figure 2 (p. 17), the report offers the diversity of responses to each question in the BPSAQ, and allows the board to learn where the greatest differences of opinions lie. Most of the interviewees found this report intriguing and spent a great deal of time discussing how the results gave them new perspectives regarding their board and the individuals involved with it:

Without a doubt, the most valuable part is seeing the responses from other members of the board. Not knowing their names, but knowing that three people think this is an issue, or four people think this is not an issue. I think that was very useful and helpful. That way or vehicle for seeing those opinions or responses expressed and having them on paper is something I think is very valuable (Ian).

Kate also appreciated being able to see everyone’s responses, helping her to learn that her board

really is “all on the same page with some of these issues.” The report was valuable for Suzy as well: “it was interesting to see where people had answered. [If] this is how someone answered... that means we should really work on it. Certainly having the questions and how they answered them, that was great.”

The *Summary of Responses Report* allowed the participants to learn a variety of new insights. For Julia and Ian, it was the ability to see the range of perceptions that different members of the board have regarding the topics covered by the BPSAQ:

[It's] pretty interesting that there's that many [questions] where we're grouped in the middle, and no one's having strong feelings, but we're maybe split halfway on the board as far as whether we'd say we agree with that statement or we don't. I think that's really interesting and I think it is useful because of the way the information is laid out... For me having the breakdown line by line, and to see how we breakdown... To me that seemed more personal and more specific and that peaked my interest... the ones that were most interesting to me, were where we weren't sharing expectations or where we weren't sharing perspectives (Julia).

I found the range of answers was, for the most part, very broad. We view things uniquely... I think [that] can be both a strength or weakness. It can be a strength in that we can all feel like we can speak up and share, even though the survey doesn't have our names on it. At the same time, if we don't have a common vision or understanding, that can be a weakness... There was always one that said there were no issues or problems. I found that interesting. Obviously, not knowing who that individual is, or if it's a couple different people [each time], but clearly, I think it's interesting that you do have that varied response (Ian).

These opportunities to see the differences of opinions and perceptions allowed Julia and

Ian to realize the reality of potentially opposing expectations for board work that is held by different individuals. Matthew saw a similar thing:

Some come from more a policy viewpoint, some come from an operational viewpoint, so you see the results in the questionnaire in how people view how the board should be operating on some degree. So that will be a challenge that we will have to work through.

Through learning the variety of responses, participants realized that individual expectations of how the board is supposed to operate deeply impacts one's opinion of the board's performance. These varying opinions certainly impact how effectively the board actually functions as well.

Julia closed her thoughts on the *Summary of Responses Report* with this:

It's useful because it flags for us areas where,... because we have different viewpoints,... we're going to be, in different moments, different ones of us are going to be frustrated or energized... I think that shared expectations are valuable, in organizations like this as well as in other relationships, I think that shared expectations is a goal that helps us to be effective. And we can't always agree exactly on, or we won't always agree, but we can have shared expectations about how we'll function. This [report] provides a tool to identify areas where we don't have shared expectations, so we can talk about those things.

Value of the BPSAQ.

Warren Buffett, the American investment entrepreneur who in 2008 was recognized as the richest person in the world, shared in his 2008 shareholder's letter, "price is what you pay; value is what you get" (Buffett, 2009). Since the BPSAQ is a free online tool, and takes mere minutes to complete, the value does not have to be extensive in order to make it worth the price. However, being an evaluative study, understanding the value is an essential part of this research. In the following section, I present the two main areas of value that were expressed by the

participants: the opportunity provided by the BPSAQ for stepping back, analyzing the big picture, and growing in both self-awareness and board-awareness; and how the process and results strengthened the resolve of individuals to address needed changes for the board.

Creating self/board-awareness and offering perspective.

I think this tool allows us, as board members, to be more self-aware. And I think it allows us, as a board, to be more self-aware. We're taking an opportunity to step back and think about [these issues], and then continuing with the work that we're doing, hopefully in the context of the awareness that we've gained as a result of the process.

This quote by Julia summarizes the thoughts presented in this section perfectly. The process of stepping back and gaining a view of the “big picture” is an integral part of board governance (Murray, 2009, p. 56). The interviewees in this study suggest that the BPSAQ is a valuable tool for doing that.

Looking from a different perspective involves stepping outside of your normal thinking, as Kate described when considering what was most valuable to her about the BPSAQ:

I think being a bit introspective, sort of really having to ask yourself, are these really issues? How do you really feel about these questions and whether or not... these issues [are] just what you feel or are these issues that you [believe] are general.

The simple act of starting to speak of oneself in the third person, as Kate does above, shows the view that an individual takes as they start to consider a situation from a new perspective. The participants I interviewed suggested that the BPSAQ allows individuals to start to ask, as Kate did, “where are we at and what do I really feel about it.” This inner contemplation was also evident in Robert's description:

It made me go back and do a back check on how far we have come. “Let's just go back a minute and take a look at what we have done, how have we done it, have we done it the

right way, are we moving too quickly, should we put some brakes on.” Those types of checks... When I read the results, I personally back checked myself and [asked], “so what is it that I can be doing differently or should I be doing something differently?” “What am I missing, am I missing something?” Those typical checks that I think you become compliant to not doing because things carry on and all of a sudden you have to go back and examine.

The growth of self-awareness that Julia spoke of is acutely evident in Robert’s description.

In explaining the value of the BPSAQ, Matthew emphasizes the need for taking this step back, leaving the usual board tasks that are required but can often diminish effectiveness:

It’s showing this is where we have to go and work on these things, as opposed to just going about the monthly meeting and going about doing our business as we have. This tool allows us to step back, take a look at the bigger picture and say, “alright, if we have these results, what do we need, to change those” and we actually have to think about that and spend time on it as opposed to just assume it’s always going to be there and not dealt with. So in a sense, it’s like it’s identifying the elephant in the room. Or the elephants in the room, to say, “these are some struggles that you need to face and deal with.”

The board being willing to face these “elephants in the room” is the topic of the next section.

Strengthening resolve.

To resolve is to settle with absolute determination. Although none of the participants used such strong language, many suggested that the process of taking part in the BPSAQ and reading the results has clarified the need for certain changes and given them the information they need to push forward in these directions. Even in cases where the majority of the board already agrees with the need for change, this tool may provide the impetus that “pushes them over the edge” (Kate). This value corresponds with the accuracy of the results that I presented

previously. The BPSAQ has the ability to confirm what sits in the minds of individuals on the board, potentially what has been left unsaid, and by presenting it in straightforward results it makes the needed decisions more clear.

Suzy recognized the BPSAQ's ability to provide this type of confirmation by saying that the results "highlighted the areas that we still need to work on and I think those areas that we're going towards." Matthew also mentioned this strengthened resolve, suggesting "it's just a good reminder to keep things on track, where we want to go." In agreeing with the challenges identified by the tool, Kate says "I think that they do need to be addressed," and she acknowledges the clarity the BPSAQ has provided: "this is confirming, for me, where I felt we really need to challenge ourselves. I think it will confirm it for our other board members as well." Although some argue assessment tools and procedures are not worth their cost because they only state the obvious, the participants in this study have recognized how gaining that confirmation is valuable and sometimes necessary for creating or continuing the momentum needed for making change happen.

Value of "Where Do You Go From Here?" suggestions.

If change is the ultimate goal, then the BPSAQ developers have offered help by including a section titled "Where Do You Go From Here?" at the end of the *BPSAQ Final Report* (see Appendix E). This is intended to offer suggestions for how the board could proceed with the results of the questionnaire and best make use of the information provided for achieving greater effectiveness. Although not all participants addressed these suggestions in their interview, the majority did express appreciation for their inclusion and believed them to be valuable. Ian said:

I think it's helpful having a roadmap. With an actual roadmap that lays out possible steps, you can have a discussion about that. The board may not say we want to do each of those steps, but I think its helpful having that as a starting point.

Kate had a similar sentiment: “I think what would be valuable would be for the board to get together and spend some time reviewing [the suggestions], and seeing what direction they want to go with it.” Not confident her board would address some of the challenges identified by the BPSAQ, Julia suggested, “I think we’re more likely to take those next steps because there’s some simple next steps proposed, and they are logical. When I read them, they make sense.”

Concerns and Limitations Surrounding the BPSAQ

I now turn my attention toward the concerns or limitations expressed by participants regarding the BPSAQ. Although there are some suggestions, and a few strong feelings, the overwhelming majority of the BPSAQ users found the tool to be not only fair and reasonable, but very effective and valuable for nonprofit boards. The benefits listed in the section above create a picture of strength for a tool that involves very little cost in terms of money or time invested for the organizations that use it. That said, as with most things, there can always be room for improvement, and the participants were happy to contribute to potentially strengthening an already useful tool. I have already discussed some concerns in the previous section, specifically regarding the BPSAQ perhaps not providing enough new or challenging information.

In this section, I begin my discussion of the concerns and limitations surrounding the BPSAQ by presenting the users’ opinions regarding the negative phrasing of the questions. Included in this concern is how this type of questioning could be harmful because it affirms negative perspectives. I follow with a discussion regarding the limitations of the results to impact long-term change without the need of an outsider to help lead the process. I conclude by offering the participants’ suggestions for how to improve the BPSAQ. These are the most prominent common themes that have emerged from the interviews, and in Table 2, you will find a complete list of the common themes I discovered, indicating my interpretation of which participants expressed each feeling or opinion.

Table 2 – Interview Responses Regarding Concerns and Limitations of the BPSAQ

Central Theme	Common Themes	Robert	Suzy	Kevin	Julia	Ian	Kate	Matthew
Concerns & Limitations	Negative question phrasing was confusing		⊙	⊙	⊙		⊙	
	Negative question phrasing was emotionally difficult		⊙					
	No or limited new information gained through results		⊙	⊙				
	Results affirm negative perspective and could be harmful		⊙	⊙				
	Finding enough time to discuss results as a board will be difficult				⊙			⊙
	Still NEED an outside person to help deal with results	⊙					⊙	⊙
	Need different streams/questionnaires for different types of boards		⊙	⊙				⊙
	More useful for larger boards		⊙	⊙				
	More useful for older organizations		⊙	⊙				

Negative phrasing of questions.

By far, the most overwhelming concern I heard was regarding the negative phrasing of the questions on the BPSAQ (see Appendix C for the complete list of BPSAQ questions). Indeed, this was the only concern that any of the participants presented out of their own volition, without being asked to consider concerns or limitations. I even received an unsolicited email from one of the board members who completed the BPSAQ but was not one of the interview participants, who told me “I was surprised by the phrasing of the questions. **Every** question is phrased in a negative context” (M. Yager, personal communication, March 7, 2011; granted permission to quote and emphasis in original). For the most part, participants found the negative questions hard to understand, however one participant had strong negative emotions in reaction to them. Not everyone felt the same way, and some participants even argued for why the phrasing was necessary, though others suggested it would likely lead to harmful discussions based on affirmed negative perspectives.

Phrasing of questions was confusing.

Although the negative questioning was clearly noticed, most of those concerned simply wondered about the reasoning for the phrasing, stating that it seemed awkward and sometimes led to confusion. In talking about the BPSAQ in general, Kevin expressed the following:

The thing that sort of cheesed me about it, or made me feel that it was harder to answer the questions, was that the questions were all phrased negatively. So I had to answer ‘no’ in order to make it a positive outcome. It made me think about the question, but it always made me think about it in a negative way. Are we bad at this, rather than are we good at this. Normally I would have to answer ‘no’ on order to say ‘yes’... I felt that I was always thinking backwards, because I don’t think like that normally. So this questionnaire confused me a little bit.

It was my perception that Kevin had a slightly more negative view of the BPSAQ overall, and it may have been primarily because of this one issue. He was not the only one that was bothered, however, as Suzy described how it made it difficult to answer the questions by stating she got so “caught up in the language that it would take me a while to turn it into positive language.” She felt she had to redo the structure of the sentence, which created confusion and took extra time.

Kate agreed, explaining her only concern with the tool:

I had one difficulty with [it]. I guess it was that the questions were always worded in the negative. I have a hard time understanding a negative question and responding to it with ‘agree’ or ‘disagree.’ Because, you know, I always have to switch it around in my mind.

Emotional reaction to questions.

It is clear that the phrasing of the questions was a source of confusion for the participants. One individual, however, went beyond simple confusion, and expressed strong negative emotional reactions to the questions. Responding to the question of “how do you feel about your experience with the BPSAQ?”, Suzy’s first words to me in the interview were:

I actually felt adverse to it. It made me, well, it got my guard up. I think because the way they worded the questions.... My emotional gut reaction was, “why are all the questions so negative?” I felt like I was fighting it. Sometimes I got so caught up on

what felt to be a negative question that it was hard to answer the actual question... It made me frustrated.

When I asked Suzy if she had read the “health check-up” note provided in the introduction of the BPSAQ, she confirmed that she had, and said that it was helpful, but “not helpful enough.” The explanation provided did not enable Suzy to interpret the questions as the BPSAQ developers hoped, but instead she said the questions felt attacking.

Others who had expressed concern with the negative phrasing of questions did not remember feeling anything similar to what Suzy expressed. Kate told me that it was not an emotional thing at all. Kevin said it was mostly just confusion, but was a little bit emotional. Suggesting that if he had answered in the affirmative to the questions, “so that the result was ‘yes, we have performed poorly in all of these areas,’ then maybe I would have felt more emotionally violated. It was a little emotional, in that I wanted to say something positive.”

Reasoning behind negative phrasing.

Although not everyone felt emotional about the questioning, four of the participants found themselves wondering why the developers made such a choice. Julia did not feel defensive because of the questions, but suggested there are other ways of asking for the type of information the tool hoped to discover. The person who emailed me suggested it would be an interesting experiment to give a few boards or even a few board members within an organization the same questions but reversed and phrased in a positive manner instead, to determine if the same accuracy of results would be found.

However, not everyone found the questions difficult to interpret. Robert said “I did not find them intimidating in any way” and Ian believed the questions were very even-handed. Matthew was comfortable with the questions, and offered a potential reasoning for why the phrasing might be important to maintain, stating, “it was just a good challenge to say, ‘how

should a board function and operate?' If it wasn't there, it might seem just somewhat less useful, because it is meant to push and challenge."

Results could be harmful if affirming negative perspective.

Despite having an emotional response, Suzy understood there was probably a reason for why they phrased the questions as they did, suggesting, "people will really have to think about it [and] they'll definitely get a result." However, she would contend that perhaps results created from that type of pushing and challenging might not be beneficial to the board. Both her and Kevin expressed concerns about the type of information negative questions create. Kevin said:

Maybe it was trying to be an outlet for people who think that the board as a whole or themselves or other people are performing negatively and want to say that but can't.

But... I could see [that] being too negative. The conversation it would bring out would be based on a lot of negative information... The survey would be affirming negative responses, which could be a less productive way to have a discussion... and damaging to relationships.

Suzy communicated something similar suggesting that the language sounds like gossip and seems to be picking fights. "I'd be worried about the aggressive nature of the questions and wondering if that might also arouse the same aggressiveness in another board member [which] might create tension later."

Although the participants may be split on their view of whether the negative questions are a concern that should be addressed, it is clearly something that all the users took notice of, some with surprise, and some with contempt.

Still require outside help.

One issue that was not part of the original interviews questions but arose as a key concern for many participants was whether an individual from outside of the organization was needed or

not for assessing the BPSAQ results and leading toward change. The concern would be if the BPSAQ can not act alone in effecting change, then even at no cost, is it worth the time to invest.

Robert was one of the first interviewees to ask a question about his board gaining access to a person that represents the BPSAQ for the purpose of consultation. Although he suggested the BPSAQ was great in being an “outside source for providing information and observation,” he felt strongly a board needs a neutral person to help with “breaking down the information and breaking down the moment and giving it back in a constructive way.” He even suggested that if a person is not available for these means, then he questions the value of using the BPSAQ and gaining the results because that “type of movement” can be damaging to start and not conclude. “The results themselves are good, but I think there always has to be that physical body.”

During their interviews, Kate and Matthew seemed to agree with this need for an outsider to help with the process of change. Matthew thought:

To be fully effective it requires outside help. I think a certain part can be completed, and a certain direction can be taken. But to really take it to the next level, to make it more effective, it does require outside help, to help facilitate the process.

Kate gave specific reasoning for why a neutral person would be necessary, suggesting “the results basically confirm that we’re all on the same page, so we agree [things need to change], but we haven’t dealt with it at this point... so we really do need to have somebody help us through that.”

Some participants, however, did not agree. Kevin felt that “since the information was given to us in a very straightforward fashion, we could do a pretty good job of walking ourselves through it.” Ian believed that a neutral mediator or board specialist may help but was not required. To address this point, he said “I don’t believe for a moment that we can’t do it on our own.” Julia said that she prefers to attempt potentially challenging conversations and tasks

without additional help first. This point alludes to a common theme I heard, and expressed well by Matthew. He realized his perspective was “just my opinion” and that “others would perhaps see it differently and say we could just do it ourselves.”

For both Kate and Matthew, because the BPSAQ has already provided good data, the person needed is not someone who will tell the board what concerns should be addressed, but someone with the experience and knowledge to inform the board the best options for how to improve. A consultant that can help the board make the changes it already knows it needs to make. Julia would agree, suggesting the conversations surrounding the BPSAQ would not be overly contentious, but knowing how to make the needed changes is something not known by the board or currently provided by the BPSAQ.

Although a significant number of participants felt an outsider would be necessary to see long-term impact from this tool, none of them suggested that need was due to an insufficiency with the BPSAQ, and only Robert felt quite strongly about the concern.

Suggestions for additional content.

When asked what was lacking with the tool, most participants seemed to not have anything they thought vital to include. There were a couple of suggestions that were offered without much hesitation, but most of the following was preceded by thoughtful silence.

Some individuals expressed items for which they felt the BPSAQ did not ask about, or could have gone into greater detail. Ian believed questions about personality clashes could have been helpful, and Matthew wondered whether more about the fiduciary obligations and responsibilities of board members might be valuable. Kate had some ideas, but said “the things that are my issues with it would be unique to just us,” so she held back.

Suzy had two suggestions, the first regarding the mission of the organization. The BPSAQ asked a lot of questions about how the board operates, but perhaps did not emphasize

specific elements testing if it is on track with fulfilling its mission. Suzy's second suggestion related to the delegation of responsibilities amongst board members. The tool did not ask about tasks being evenly distributed across the board members or "about actual workload as much as necessary." Suzy realized this concern would relate more to some boards and not others, however, which is something I address in the next section.

Other suggestions.

The other limited suggestions that were made did not relate to additional content for questions, but are valuable to consider. With the comment about allocation of tasks, Suzy noted it "would be for a working board more so than for a policy board." Considering that idea, she suggested:

I wonder if also there would be different streams. For an older board, for a board who has this big of a budget, has a hired program director, has been [recently] established as charitable... Because there are different questions that apply for different things, and there are a lot of questions on there that just didn't apply to us yet. But we could have been focusing on other questions that were more applicable to our stage.

Kevin may have agreed with the idea of having different streams, as he suggested the tool "seemed less tailored for us" and "went too far for us."

Some of the other suggestions offered by participants were fairly minor, such as Julia's recommendation the BPSAQ use the phrase "opportunities for improvement" instead of challenges. However, another idea that seemed worthwhile to consider was a limitation related to the results that was raised by Matthew. He suggested that the reporting process could include information on how to get help for the areas of challenge that were identified. He hoped for "a recommendation as to what kinds of outside help" is available, perhaps a list of resources or geographically appropriate board consultants the organization could enlist.

Potential for Creating Change

With this last recommendation made by Matthew, it seems appropriate for us to examine the participants' perceptions regarding the tool's ability to create change in their organizations. Below, I present opinions on the likelihood of the boards to discuss the results, the likelihood of the board to attempt to address the challenges that are presented in the final reports, and what might be the long-term impact of the BPSAQ for the organizations who participated in the study. I also present the participants' desires to use the tool again with the board or whether they would recommend it for other boards to use. The common themes that arose regarding the BPSAQ's potential for creating change within organizations are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 – Interview Responses Regarding Potential for Organizational Change

Central Theme	Common Themes	Robert	Suzy	Kevin	Julia	Ian	Kate	Matthew
Potential Organizational Change	Board will discuss results	⊙	⊙	⊙		⊙	⊙	
	Board will probably discuss results							⊙
	Board will likely not discuss results				⊙			
	Results require separate board meeting for discussion to be effective							⊙
	Confident that identified challenges will be addressed by the board	⊙	⊙	⊙		⊙		⊙
	Only some challenges will be addressed because of time concerns		⊙		⊙	⊙		
	IF time is taken, confident that positive change would result				⊙		⊙	⊙
	Confident BPSAQ will lead to positive change	⊙		⊙		⊙		⊙
	Results will help to prioritize board tasks	⊙						
	Discussion of individual responses should lead to shared expectations				⊙	⊙		
	Results will implicitly impact people's perceptions/opinions	⊙			⊙			
	Future BPSAQ use important to measure success of board change		⊙				⊙	⊙

Likelihood of the board to discuss results.

This type of tool is probably only valuable if the board takes the time to discuss the results. By this, I mean to set aside some time and discuss what was presented in the two final reports. In the following section, I deal with a further step, the board attempting to address the challenges, which involves a decision that they want to act on the results.

The majority of participants did not doubt whether this type of discussion would happen.

Two of the interviewees said the board they were involved in had already placed a preliminary discussion in the next's board meeting's agenda, and would decide then if they needed to set aside a whole meeting or special retreat to discuss the results further. Not certain whether fellow board members planned to discuss the challenges or not, Suzy had already decided "to bring it up next time." Even more assertive was Ian, in stating that the board would definitely discuss the results "if I have anything to do with it!"

Matthew was less certain, suggesting his board would probably discuss the results but it would depend on everyone's opinion. He said it might need some individuals to come together and be persuasive that the tool and its results were deserving of the required time investment. It was this concern over whether the board had the available time that caused Matthew to hesitate. He suggested that to effectively discuss the results "it would probably mean a separate meeting entirely to deal with it and leave board business aside." No one else discussed the time it would require, except for Suzy who believed it could potentially only take thirty minutes, but more likely about two hours.

Likelihood of the board to address challenges.

Discussing the BPSAQ and its results is just the first step, however, and I was interested to know if the participants felt their boards would put in the work to address the challenges that had been identified. Kevin was confident that the board would address at least some of the challenges highlighted, stating that the plan already was for each board member to look over the results as individuals, and then at the next board meeting "bring one or two things that we thought stood out and then we will discuss them as a board and see where we can improve."

It seemed common that not all the challenges would be addressed, with those chosen as most pressing or important taking priority. This was partly due to time, as Suzy suggested. Matthew hoped that the challenges were "addressed and addressed effectively." For him, it

would take the board prioritizing “our top five” areas for improvement, focusing well on them, and making sure the process is sound to make it meaningful. His concern was “finding the time for people on a volunteer board to set aside [to] actually focus on it.”

Another reason that some issues may not be addressed is that there may be an outside force beyond the control of the board for why that challenge has presented itself. Kate believed that her board would not address one particular issue because it involves not just her organization and thinks “there would be too much interference” to creating change. She said, “I think we’ll agree that it’s an issue [and] I’m confident that we will look at it. I am not confident that we will look at it and try to address it.”

Julia had an intriguing perspective because her board had also contracted the work of a consultant who had made similar recommendations to what the BPSAQ suggested in its results. Confident the board would address some of the issues, her question was whether the momentum toward change was a result of the BPSAQ. However, Julia still added a valuable opinion that is important to consider because it may be a potential challenge for many boards:

This is the type of important work that sometimes gets missed by our board because we’re focused on immediate details. Some of this is about macro-level planning and effectiveness and sometimes that gets pushed aside for dealing with fires. I’m hoping that because the board has delegated some of this to sub-teams, that it can come back to the board and build health. The board doesn’t do a good job of taking time to use opportunities like this always [but] my perception is that there’s commitment to addressing some of the things that are laid out here.

Potential long-term impacts.

Although Julia’s board may not make direct use of the BPSAQ results, as she was not confident others were willing to spend the time to discuss the results, the insights shared above

are valuable for any board to consider. It takes determined work to address challenges and make significant changes to how a board operates. However, some of the insights learned from the questionnaire can still have impact regardless of whether a board discusses the results or not, by making their way into the minds of the board members and affecting the way they perceive others and engage in conversations. Julia believes the BPSAQ:

Informs the way that I as a board member can view conversations even when the topic isn't board effectiveness... When I can know that there are a variety of perspectives and expectations, then sometimes I can understand behaviour that's going on in the room... Knowing that those different perspectives are there helps me to be more effective in relating to the other members of the board.

This is the type of long-term impact that is hard to measure or quantify. Some impacts can be measured however, perhaps with a repeat use of the BPSAQ, and the participants looked forward to those as well. Robert expected that board development and training would become more of a priority after gaining new insight from the results. Kate and Ian suggested the boards they represented would see growth in how they dealt with strategic planning for the future.

Another hope Ian had related to the *Summary of Responses Report* that showed how members of the board held varying expectations for how the board should function. He stated that the results showed the “need to talk about our mutual perspectives and understandings and what our expectations are for our board,” suggesting that improvement was not only necessary but also likely. This concern over expectations was something that Matthew shared, believing that some board members will “still be wanting to be more of an operational style versus a policy style” board, but the results show focusing on future planning and effective governance is needed. His board can no longer “deal with the day to day which is really up to management” and therefore shared expectations of how the board will operate in the future must be gained

through discussion and hard work. Although he is “not sure how that will be resolved” he is confident that they need to and will see long-term change in that area.

What Ian and Matthew are communicating is that they believe the BPSAQ allows a board to not only learn where it needs to improve, but also to gain perspective on how the members relate and work together for the sake of the organization. Similarly, Robert believed the tool gave his board a new perspective on how they relate to the organization itself:

The tool came in and said that I have to say goodbye to that personal aspect of [the organization] and now it is the society's. When it becomes the society's, it becomes something that is addressed by a board of directors. It isn't addressed by me, or other individuals, and the answers may be something we don't want to hear. But that stage has now left and we can say goodbye to it.

Robert believes the BPSAQ gives his board straightforward results that show it must release some of the personal aspects of the mission, and truly grow up as a group to deal with issues as a board of directors. He is confident this change will occur. It was intriguing to hear these similar views from board members of both the youngest and oldest organizations in the study.

The BPSAQ has clearly given some of the interviewees a new perspective on their board, how it operates and what changes are necessary. All the participants are confident they will see change in their boards and that the tool will lead to long-term impact for their organizations.

Future use of the BPSAQ.

In order to assess an individual's view of a tool, an important question to ask is if they would use it again in the future. Of the participants in this study, all but two thought it to be valuable to repeat with their board, with one of the remaining not opposed to it but not yet convinced. Kevin offered a reason for why another tool would be preferred next time the board chose to do a self-assessment, stating that it would provide “more diversity of information.”

A few participants believed repeating the BPSAQ every year would be valuable, with Matthew indicating a preference for every three to five years. The main reason for repeating is to compare each set of results to previous years to gauge the level of improvement and change. Matthew said, “it forms for my organization a benchmark to say, ‘this was what we had [before]. Where are we now and how have we dealt with those things?’” Kate suggested knowing that you were going to repeat the tool “would challenge you to do something about the challenges.”

Reflecting on the BPSAQ’s value, Julia believed this, or a similar tool, should be used annually “as a way of pausing and assessing and then moving forward” near the end of each year, before new board members were appointed. “As we are orientating new people we could take an opportunity as a board to evaluate where we are at.” Considering a different approach, Robert suggested the tool is beneficial in “those moments of being stuck” as a “training tool,” to help the board see where and how it needs to change in order to move to the next stage.

Another question I asked was whether the participants would recommend this tool for other boards that were seeking an evaluation of their performance. Again, the majority of them suggested they would recommend without hesitation, though some were like Julia in saying that they “don’t have a lot to compare it to.” Matthew suggested it would depend on the type of board, but “even if it’s a small group, [if] they’re wanting to be a policy type board, then yes, I would recommend it as useful.” With vast experience, including serving on a school board, Kate made her recommendation universal by saying, “I spent three years on the school board, and I would think that those would have been valuable questions for us to answer or ask ourselves at that time, so I would say all boards [could benefit].”

BPSAQ Experience Questionnaire

After reviewing each of the interviews, and finding the common themes that arose, I created the *BPSAQ Experience Questionnaire* (Figure 4) and then had each participant complete

it electronically through email. The purpose was twofold: to assess my accuracy as a researcher in determining the opinions of each interviewee related to the common themes that arose, and to gain the opinion of each participant on the common themes they had not addressed in their interview. In the following section, I present the results of the *BPSAQ Experience Questionnaire* (BEQ), specifically highlighting the discrepancies that arose.

Results.

In Table 4, 5, and 6, I have presented the responses of each participant to the BEQ (labeled 'BEQ') set beside my interpretation of their opinions as given in the interview stage of the research (labeled 'Int'). Table 4 deals with the benefits of the BPSAQ, Table 5 presents the concerns and limitations of the BPSAQ, and Table 6 presents the views on the tool's potential for organizational change.

For the most part, there was a large percentage of agreement between my interpretations of participants' opinions expressed during the interviews and how they answered the questionnaire. In total, 187 of the possible 308 responses were congruent, for 60.7% accuracy. There were an additional 96 items for which participants agreed to in the questionnaire, but had not discussed in the interview. These are items for which I could not assess agreement prior to the questionnaire. Added to the congruent responses, the total positive assessments become 283 out of a possible 308 items. This translates into 91.9% of the statements being congruent, which provides us relative assurance that the two data sources used together gives us a fairly accurate assessment of the BPSAQ.

An issue that arose with the questionnaire is that some participants did not answer all the questions as intended (simply stating 'yes' regarding whether you agree with the statement). Julia, Robert, and Ian all chose to answer 'maybe' or 'unsure' for a few of the statements. For instance, responding to "no need for outside person to help with using results," Ian responded

Table 4 – Interview/Questionnaire Comparison Regarding Benefits of the BPSAQ

Central Theme	Common Themes	Robert		Suzy		Kevin		Julia		Ian		Kate		Matthew	
		Int	BEQ	Int	BEQ	Int	BEQ	Int	BEQ	Int	BEQ	Int	BEQ	Int	BEQ
Benefits of the BPSAQ	Quick to complete		☉		☉	☉	☉	☉	☉	☉			☉		☉
	User-friendly		☉				☉		☉		☉				☉
	Questions were fair, reasonable, and easy to answer		☉			☉			☉		☉				☉
	Content of questions was challenging in a positive way		☉						☉						☉
	Asked important questions that haven't been asked in a long time					☉			☉						☉
	"Health Check-up" paragraph in introduction was helpful preparation		☉			☉			☉						☉
	Comprehensive coverage of board performance		☉			☉			☉						☉
	Valuable outlet for quieter voices on board		Maybe			☉			☉						☉
	Valuable for stepping back and seeing the big picture		☉						☉						☉
	Highlighted previously 'unsaid' beliefs/feelings		☉			☉			☉						☉
	Straightforward results					☉			☉						☉
	Accurate results with few surprises		☉			☉			☉						☉
	Results provided new information		☉						☉					Unsure	☉
	Highlighted new/needed/important areas for discussion & change		☉			☉			☉						☉
	Item-by-Item Summary was particularly valuable/insightful			☉		☉			☉						☉
	Results especially valuable/informative for new board members			☉		☉			☉						☉
Results showed how people's expectations influenced responses								☉						☉	
Results identified "elephant(s) in the room"		☉						☉					Maybe	☉	
Strengthened resolve regarding particular issues/needs		☉						☉						☉	
Valuable for growing in self-awareness as individuals and as a board			☉		☉			☉						☉	
Suggestions for how to use results are helpful			☉					☉						☉	
No NEED for outside person to help with using results								☉						☉	
Healthy and useful tool overall		☉						☉						☉	

Table 5 – Interview/Questionnaire Comparison of Concerns and Limitations of the BPSAQ

Central Theme	Common Themes	Robert		Suzy		Kevin		Julia		Ian		Kate		Matthew	
		Int	BEQ	Int	BEQ	Int	BEQ	Int	BEQ	Int	BEQ	Int	BEQ	Int	BEQ
Concerns & Limitations	Negative question phrasing was confusing			☉	☉	☉	☉		☉			☉			
	Negative question phrasing was emotionally difficult			☉	☉	☉	☉								
	No or limited new information gained through results			☉		☉	☉								
	Results affirm negative perspective and could be harmful			☉	☉	☉	☉								
	Finding enough time to discuss results as a board will be difficult		☉					☉			Maybe			☉	
	Still NEED an outside person to help deal with results		☉								Maybe		☉		☉
	Need different streams/Questionnaires for different types of boards		☉		☉	☉	☉							☉	☉
	More useful for larger boards		☉		☉	☉	☉								☉
More useful for older organizations		☉		☉	☉	☉								☉	

Table 6 – Interview/Questionnaire Comparison of Potential for Organizational Change

Central Theme	Common Themes	Robert		Suzy		Kevin		Julia		Ian		Kate		Matthew	
		Int	BEQ	Int	BEQ	Int	BEQ	Int	BEQ	Int	BEQ	Int	BEQ	Int	BEQ
Potential for Organizational Change	Board will discuss results	☉	☉	☉	☉	☉	☉			☉	☉				
	Board will probably discuss results													☉	☉
	Board will likely not discuss results							☉							
	Results require separate board meeting for discussion to be effective		☉					☉						☉	☉
	Confident that identified challenges will be addressed by the board	☉				☉	☉				☉	☉		☉	☉
	Only some challenges will be addressed because of time concerns		☉					☉	☉		☉	☉			
	IF time is taken, confident that positive change would result							☉	☉		☉	☉		☉	☉
	Confident BPSAQ will lead to positive change	☉						☉			☉			☉	☉
	Results will help to prioritize board tasks	☉				☉	☉					Maybe			☉
	Discussion of individual responses should lead to shared expectations		☉			☉	☉				☉	☉			☉
	Results will implicitly impact people's perceptions/opinions	☉	Unsure					☉	☉		☉	☉		☉	☉
	Future BPSAQ use important to measure success of board change		☉			☉	☉		Maybe		☉	☉		☉	☉

with “unsure.” These types of answers made up another ten of the responses. I have chosen to include these answers as the participants wrote them for three reasons: to maintain validity, to draw light to the need for greater clarity in wording for such a tool, and because I was not able to have lengthy discussions with any of the participants regarding these particular responses.

If the interview data was not comprehensive enough, the results of the BEQ add strength to the argument that the BPSAQ is full of benefits and value for the nonprofit organization that utilize it. The BEQ responses seen in Table 4 exhibit an overwhelming agreement with the statements of benefits. Discounting the “unsures” and “maybes” from Robert and Ian, there were only 19 blank (disagreement) responses from a total of 157 statements remaining. That corresponds to 87.9% agreement with the common benefits that arose from the interviews. This finding suggests that the overall, the consensus on the BPSAQ was that it was beneficial in numerous ways to the nonprofit boards that participated in this study.

Regarding Table 5, the concerns and limitations of the BPSAQ, both Suzy and Kevin showed significant levels of agreement for this central theme. Robert and Matthew also showed a moderate level of agreement with the common areas of concerns and limitations, though their suggestions were not as negative in nature (the first four statements in the table). Looking at Table 5, it is clear that there is not an overwhelming level of concern for the BPSAQ and how boards can make use of the tool.

Table 6 shows a more moderate and varied response toward the BPSAQ’s potential for leading to organizational change. Although Suzy, Kevin, and Kate did not discuss as many potentials of change in their interviews, they all acknowledged agreement with at least four additional statements of potential impact. For each of the other participants, the comparison between the interview data and BEQ was reasonable. Although Table 6 may not have as many agreed statements as Table 4, a key point to note is that every participant agreed with either “if

time is taken, confident that positive change would results,” or “confident BPSAQ will lead to positive change.” This finding is a significant vote of confidence for the BPSAQ and its ability to help lead nonprofit boards toward enhanced performance.

Discrepancy.

Although points of agreement are valuable to consider, it is equally as important to note points of discrepancy. There were 12 significant statements of discrepancy between the participant’s interview data and their BEQ responses. Some of these represented an apparent change in perspective, such as Kate suggesting in her interview that the “board will discuss results” and in the BEQ agreeing with the statement that the “board will probably discuss results” (see Table 6). These slight shifts are the type of data the BEQ is valuable to confirm.

When I received the completed BEQs from participants, many of the discrepancies were surprising but allowed for greater understanding and discovery as purposed. One such case was Julia’s shift from believing the negative question phrasing created confusion (see Table 5). In analyzing the interview, I had interpreted the following statement to mean that Julia was slightly confused by the use of negative questioning, but not emotionally affected:

I was aware that they were regularly talking about a potential negative aspect and it did occur to me that there is an opposite way of asking several of those questions... but I didn’t feel that it bothered me. I don’t recall feeling as though I was getting my back up or feeling defensive of my board because the questions were framed that way.

It seems as though the phrasing I used in that statement made it incongruent with Julia’s feelings. She may not have been confused by the questions themselves, but perhaps confused why the developers chose to write them in that way. Therefore, utilizing the BEQ clarified her perspective and allowed me to read that comment closer to the way Julia intended. Thus, the tool acted as the validity check I hoped it would be.

Some discrepancies were so surprising that I did actually contact a few participants in order to get clarification. In their BEQ responses, both Kevin and Julia had discrepant answers regarding Table 4's statement of the "content of the questions was challenging in a positive way," which originally appeared without the tag "in a positive way" as you can see in Figure 4 (p. 35). Julia's switch to disagreement provided enough confusion on my part to contact her, and once I explained the intent behind the statement, she confirmed that she did in fact agree. Kevin confirmed that he agreed with the statement, suggesting the questions helped him to think about issues in new ways, despite my original interpretation that they did not challenge him. Therefore, his response remains as an agreement in the BEQ results. I have changed the wording for that statement in Table 4 for the purposes of clarity.

In assessing these discrepant responses, it becomes clear the value of the BEQ in confirming or altering my meaning making interpretations of what participants have said. However, I did not have the time to discuss differences with each interviewee. One of those that would have been interesting to investigate was Suzy's feelings regarding the "health check-up" note offered by the BPSAQ (see Figure 1) and whether it was helpful or not. In her interview, responding to a question regarding that note, she responded, "I found that [note] helpful." Hearing that she was offended by the wording of the questions, I offered the statement, "but not helpful enough" and to that she agreed. "Not helpful enough. I read it, it was helpful, that section was helpful but it didn't translate into the actual [feelings]." With this in mind, I interpreted her statements to correspond to the fact she was both confused and emotionally affected by the negative phrasing of the questions, but also that she found the "health check-up" note helpful. She did not agree in her response to the BEQ, and this would have been a valuable discussion to have if time had permitted.

Some of the discrepancies could be a result of the time that had passed after the

interviews, potentially allowing the participants' perspectives to change. As suggested with Julia's discrepancy regarding the confusing negative questions, the wording I chose for the BEQ statements may have also posed a challenge as well. In my data analysis, I grouped together general meanings that were similar. In creating the BEQ, I summed up multiple general meanings with one overarching statement. Perhaps the phrasing I chose ruled out certain responses. This may have been the case for Kevin and his discrepant responses for the statement "questions were fair, reasonable, and easy to answer" on Table 4. He had clearly stated in the interview, "the questions are all fairly easy to answer." However, he may not have agreed that they were fair and reasonable, especially considering his argument against the negative questioning, and thus it seems reasonable to assume he could not agree with this statement because of how I grouped together multiple aspects of the questions that I believed to be similar.

Although there were some discrepancies, they were few, and the results of the BEQ validity check seems to have fulfilled its purpose by confirming many of my interpretations of the participants' meanings, as well as highlighting some areas of misinterpretation.

Summary

In this chapter, I have presented the findings of my study, utilizing the research questions as a guideline. I have attempted to use the participants' own words as often as possible, letting their voices explain their feelings regarding the BPSAQ. This is a common practice in qualitative inquires, and a strategy for strengthening the validity of the report. I have also utilized tables to present the summarized data in a way that is easily accessible.

I began with the perceived benefits of the BPSAQ, as described by the participants. I followed with the concerns and limitations that were highlighted, and then presented the interviewees opinions regarding the tool's potential for leading to organizational change. Overall, there was overwhelming support for the BPSAQ, with more benefits perceived than

limitations. The majority of the participants said they would use the tool again as well as recommend it for others.

I then presented the findings of the BEQ tool that I created during the data analysis stage of the research. The responses of this tool were intriguing, and confirmed the greater part of my interpretations. I presented some of the discrepancies between my analysis and the BEQ responses from individual participants, suggesting reasons for why those differences are present.

I believe the results presented here are valuable to consider, and influential in how we assess evaluative tools in general and the BPSAQ specifically. In the next chapter, I will turn my attention to the discussion of why these findings are important and how they can affect future research.

Chapter Five – Discussion and Conclusions

In the previous chapter, I presented the findings of this study, focusing the data around the central themes created by my research questions: the BPSAQ's benefits, limitations, and potential for change. In this chapter, I offer a discussion of the key findings and how they contribute to and encourage further nonprofit research of evaluative tools.

I begin by summarizing the overall value of the BPSAQ, and how I believe the findings of this study present an overwhelming case of support for this new online tool. I then address a few credible suggestions for the BPSAQ that I believe to be worth investigating, specifically: examining alternatives to the negative questioning; tailoring the BPSAQ for different types of organizations; and using the BPSAQ as a conduit of nonprofit guidance and resource. After considering these suggestions, I move on to the BEQ that I created, discussing its limitations and how it may be improved. Throughout this chapter, I make recommendations for possible future research, and believe that utilizing an adapted BEQ in the future may be worth consideration. I conclude by summarizing what I have attempted to accomplish in this study, offering a challenge to all those who work with nonprofit organizations.

Value of the BPSAQ

In 1991, Holland suggested, “the instruments presently being offered for [self-evaluation] should be viewed only as springboards for discussion and not as valid measures of actual performance” (p. 35). A great deal of his research focused on assessing the validity of self-evaluation tools for nonprofit organizations, and even into the current century, he continued to find them insufficient. The BPSAQ's precursor has already been tested for reliability and validity, with commendable results, and its current version has remained true to those tests (Harrison & Murray, 2010; 2009).

Holland (1991) also asserts, “because of the expense of inviting in outside expert

evaluators, few boards obtain external appraisals of their performance” (p. 26). The BPSAQ currently exists as a free online tool that nonprofit boards can easily access and utilize. Through the results, boards receive two feedback reports that detail areas of concern regarding their performance. This tool responds to Holland’s concerns admirably, in a way that no other tool has been shown to do (Murray, 2005; 2001).

Another issue the developers of the BPSAQ suggest is critical to address is that most nonprofit assessment tools gain knowledge of the organization from just a limited viewpoint (Harrison & Murray, 2010). This tool offers the potential for a 360-degree view by suggesting that any individual who has frequent interaction with the board should complete the questionnaire. By adding these additional perspectives, the BPSAQ’s capacity to effectively assess a nonprofit is further strengthened.

Although this seemingly valuable tool has been tested quantifiably for reliability and validity, the problem this study has addressed is its value to the organizations that utilize it, which had previously not been examined. The purpose of this qualitative evaluative study was to discover how members of nonprofit boards who use the BPSAQ describe their experience with the tool. Through qualitative interviews, I discovered the views of seven critical leaders from Vancouver Island nonprofit organizations regarding the benefits and limits of the BPSAQ and the potential impact they believe it can have on their organizations.

The results of the interviews speak loudly in regards to the overall value of the tool. Every participant expressed agreement that the BPSAQ accurately assessed their board’s performance, strengthening the already established validity and reliability arguments. When comparing the common themes that arose during the interviews, the only other item that reached complete agreement among the participants was that the BPSAQ provided a comprehensive coverage of issues related to board performance. These two findings are incredibly significant and set the

BPSAQ apart from other nonprofit self-assessment tools.

Another key finding relates to whether the users believed the questionnaire's results provide the opportunity to lead their nonprofit board toward positive change and greater effectiveness. All but two participants were confident that the BPSAQ would lead their organization toward positive change, and those two were only limited by their questions about whether their boards would put the time in to make use of the results. Instead of saying they were confident, those two participants suggested "if the time is taken," then they would be confident positive change would result.

Suggestions for Future Research

Involving just seven participants, representing three nonprofit organizations, this study is unable to suggest that its findings could be generalized for all users of the BPSAQ. However, considering the unanimous nature of these key findings, it becomes hard to not make that claim. To increase the potential for being able to generalize the findings, future research could repeat the methodology established by this study but incorporate a larger sample.

In this inquiry, I approached various boards to participate in my research and to take part in the BPSAQ. One issue that arose during the research process was that one of the boards involved contracted a consultant to work with them. This is certainly a positive step for any nonprofit organization, but it did raise concerns about how invested that board was in the BPSAQ process. Another suggestion for future research would be to interview board members from boards that have sought out the tool on their own volition, and then approach them to complete follow-up research regarding their experience of the tool. This would help to increase the likelihood of the participants being fully invested in the process.

The interviews from this study were completed within a month of the boards finishing the online questionnaire. Another recommendation for similar research would be to wait a longer

period of time, to potentially give the boards an opportunity to work with the results. The perspectives shared would then be based more out of the reality of how the board is utilizing the results as compared to personal opinion. This may change the line of questioning quite significantly, but could provide intriguing data. What would be lost are the fresh and emotionally-charged perspectives that were apparent in some of my interviews. A second option would be to complete the interviews within the same parameters, but do secondary follow-up interviews or BEQ assessments at a later date, after the original interviews.

The last suggestion for future research that relates to my study would be to have the organizations repeat the BPSAQ at specified times, perhaps once a year for three years, to effectively determine the changes that may take place. Of course, the BPSAQ developers may already have some of these recommendations planned.

Participant Suggestions

Despite the overwhelming recognition of the value of the BPSAQ, there were some suggestions that arose considering certain elements that could be examined. This section deals with the following concerns that were raised:

1. A few participants were bothered by the use of questions that were consistently framed in the negative, and suggested rewording should be a priority for the developers.
2. Although claiming the tool had value for their organization, a couple users suggested that if the BPSAQ was tailored more specifically for their specific context, it could have had more value.
3. One participant thought it would be valuable for the BPSAQ to include resources for how to improve in their final reports.

Negative questioning.

Regarding their Seattle-area pilot testing of the previous version of the BPSAQ, Harrison

and Murray (2010) stated, “the most frequently expressed dissatisfaction with the survey instrument was that the items in it were worded in a ‘negative’ manner” (p. 10). They created the ‘health check-up’ note in hopes of alleviating some of those concerns, but found that it was still an issue in the July to November 2010 pilot testing of the current BPSAQ. My findings confirm that the negative phrasing of questions is still a concern as that was also the most frequent complaint that I heard throughout my interviews.

The BPSAQ developers suggest they are paying attention to this concern and if dissatisfaction with negative questioning remains, they are willing to address the issue (Harrison & Murray, 2010). Although there was overall satisfaction with the benefits and value that the BPSAQ provided, it is clear from the findings that this issue indeed deserves addressing.

An intriguing option to consider was offered through the unsolicited email I received from a BPSAQ user that did not act as an interview participant. He suggested, “it would be an interesting experiment to give a few boards the same questions but phrased in a positive manner instead” (M. Yager, personal communication, March 7, 2011). This may indeed be an area the developers of the BPSAQ wish to investigate. Perhaps a version of the tool with the questions reversed to offer positive phrasing could be pilot tested for validity and reliability, using the same methodology of the Seattle-area project. This would help to determine if the negative phrasing of questions is necessitated out of a need for accuracy.

Potential tailoring of the BPSAQ.

In the section titled “other suggestions” in Chapter Four, I presented Suzy’s idea for developing different streams of the BPSAQ to fit organizations in different contexts. The concern was that some questions did not apply to her board, and there were other areas that were left unexamined. Kevin affirmed these feelings by suggesting the BPSAQ seemed “less tailored” for his board than he would have liked.

Although these concerns did not result in the questionnaire lacking value for the boards involved, it may still be worth considering. A potential tailoring of the BPSAQ would involve creating multiple questionnaires. They could be predominantly the same, with just a few adjustments made by removing redundant questions and perhaps adding some questioning that is specific to the board in that context. When a coordinator registers their board, they could respond to questions regarding the characteristics of the organization, specifically regarding age, staffing levels, and budget. These responses can be used to determine which of perhaps four questionnaires the board would be sent to complete, focusing on an:

1. Organization under five years of age with no staffing.
2. Organization with less than the equivalent of three full-time staff.
3. Organization with three or more full-time staff.
4. Organization with an annual budget in excess of \$1 million (or the amount deemed reasonable to necessitate a distinctive tool).

This type of tailoring would be necessitated by the BPSAQ being a helping tool for boards rather than a nonprofit research tool, which may be its primary purpose, and could lead to this suggestion being too difficult or impractical to implement.

A source for help.

It is clear from the data I collected in this study that the BPSAQ provides a great deal of valuable information for nonprofit boards. Specifically, it tells them what areas deserve focused attention in order to improve and shows them where there is general consensus or a wide range of opinions regarding certain issues. The tool and its reports essentially lead the boards into valuable discussions for how they can enhance their performance.

Unfortunately, many board members do not know how to make the needed improvements. Although discussion about issues, and especially the differences of opinions, are

valuable, one participant in this study suggested it would be useful to gain access to resources through the BPSAQ reporting process. The responses of participants were split regarding the need for outside help to foster change, but Matthew and Robert specifically asked if there would be access to someone to act as a consultant as their boards worked through the results.

There is a growing amount of research surrounding nonprofit management and board performance, but this literature rarely gets into the hands of the board leaders who need it (Brown, 2005). The suggestion made by Matthew is for the BPSAQ results to include either suggestions for where to look for guidance, or contact information for consultants that would be useful. Perhaps a collection of three to five reputable board consultants per state or province could be collected and included in the “Where Do You Go From Here?” section at the end of the *BPSAQ Final Report*. Another suggestion could be to incorporate one to three valuable resources that relate to each of the nine categories of effectiveness so the boards would have the option of utilizing them for insight and guidance.

Again, these suggestions may be beyond the scope of the intended use of the BPSAQ, and may be unreasonable to provide. However, it is apparent that some users of the questionnaire would gain value from such options.

BPSAQ Experience Questionnaire

As part of my data analysis, I examined the interviews and constructed units of general meaning: short statements to summarize main points the participants shared. I then gathered together the various units of general meaning and created a list of common themes that arose. This list was divided into three central themes for which I created a separate table (see Tables 1, 2, and 3). After creating the tables, I realized I could use the statements of common themes in another way. I produced a questionnaire that provided me the opportunity to check with the participants whether they agreed with the statements. The *BPSAQ Experience Questionnaire*

(BEQ) had two main rationales: to check the validity of my interpretation of the meaning behind each of the participants' interviews, and to give them a chance to offer their perspectives on issues that arose in other interviews but they may not yet have individually addressed.

My presentation of the BEQ results in Chapter 4 is quite comprehensive, analyzing the congruency of interview interpretations with responses to the tool, and detailing the few discrepancies that did arise. My main concern regarding the BEQ was that I did not have the time (because the questionnaire itself was an addition to the proposed research) to discuss the responses made by each participant in comparison with their interview data. To do so would have certainly provided even greater depth of knowledge into the perceptions of the users of the BPSAQ. This type of process could be a crucial component of a phenomenological approach, where continuous member-checking and multiple forms of data collection are utilized, and is a great option for future research.

The BEQ did have some limitations. After receiving the completed questionnaires from each of the participants, it seemed to me that some statements might have been confusing and led the interviewees to give surprising answers. For instance, regarding the potential for organizational change (see Table 6), a number of the statements were meant to induce only one agreement out of two or three statements (e.g. either the "board will discuss results," the "board will probably discuss results," or "the board will likely not discuss results"). Some participants agreed to more than one of these statements, which I suggest might be a problem with a lack of clarity within the BEQ, and could be corrected with formatting changes. However, I must recognize that some participants did present multiple opinions in their interviews regarding some of these grouped statements. This presence of "multiple, often conflicting" interpretations of an experience within one individual is an important argument of the social constructivist worldview (Schwandt, 1994, p. 128). This is a reason why qualitative data is sometimes preferred over

quantitative, because it offers the potential for collecting seemingly dichotomous perspectives that often lie within an individual's outlook.

Despite these limitations, I was still able to gain valuable insight from the questionnaire. It also showed to be moderately congruent with the interview data. For these reasons, I think my version of the BEQ could be just a first step to creating a quantitative tool for quickly assessing an individual's perception of the BPSAQ and its value for his or her organization. Of course, changes would have to be made. The formatting regarding grouped questions is a needed step, as suggested in the previous paragraph. The wording of each common theme needs to be revisited, to ensure they are accurate for what they are trying to assess. Some statements may need to be removed, and additional statements could be added. Another consideration would be to use a Likert scale style of response options. Both Ian and Julia wrote "maybe" or "unsure" for some of the statements, and this suggested that having a Likert scale options could be beneficial.

A future version of the BEQ could be valuable in a study that, like mine, is hoping to gather perceptions of the BPSAQ held by the users of the tool, but also wants to utilize a much larger sample size. With larger participant numbers, in depth interviewing may not be possible, but gathering responses from a short questionnaire that takes approximately five minutes to complete would be reasonable.

Conclusion

Nonprofit organizations are an essential and beneficial part of our global society. However, because of scandals within the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, the call for greater accountability and performance evaluation has never been higher. The boards who govern nonprofits have been shown to greatly affect organizational performance, and therefore numerous books have been written and research projects undertaken in order to assess why boards behave as they do and offer suggestions for how they can improve.

Opportunities for the board to assess its own performance have been shown to be valuable for the development of effective boards and successful organizations (Herman & Renz, 2000; Brudney & Murray, 1998; Green & Gresinger, 1996). “Many nonprofit organizations... eagerly seek valid and reliable measurements that will yield clear indicators of how well they are doing,” however there are few tools that have undergone testing to show they are reliable or valid (Murray, 2001, p. 39). The Board Performance Self-Assessment Questionnaire has been proven valid and reliable, and it provides a quick, free, online option for those boards looking to assess their performance. This tool has been the central focus of this inquiry.

The findings of this study show that the BPSAQ is perceived to be user-friendly, comprehensive, accurate in its results, and likely to have a positive impact. The interview data suggested numerous benefits of the tool, and a follow-up questionnaire regarding perceptions showed that each participant believed it was a healthy and useful tool that would lead to positive change for their organization.

There were few concerns raised about the BPSAQ, and the only one that was unsolicited was regarding how the questions were all framed in the negative. Although this concern caused confusion for some, frustration for others, and even emotional pain for one individual, it did not cause participants to discount the value of the online tool. Nor did any other concern.

The purpose of this inquiry was to gather and present qualitative data regarding how users perceived the BPSAQ. I have offered this presentation in Chapter Four, giving rich descriptions of these perceptions by allowing the participants to speak for themselves. This data will be useful to those wishing to do future research on the BPSAQ itself, or to complete an evaluative study on another assessment tool.

Herman and Renz (2000), among others, suggest that regardless of the tool used, boards that undergo evaluation and make “intentional efforts to improve board performance [will find]

such improvement” (p. 158). Matthew suggested it relates to attitude:

It’s coming at it with a positive mindset to say, “every board, no matter how good they are right now, they can always be better.” So there are always things to work on, and that can be a good thing.

I believe Matthew’s assessment to be true, and the findings of this inquiry show the BPSAQ gives boards accurate challenges to work on. This study may not provide evidence to suggest that this tool is better than any other that exists for the purposes of board performance evaluation, but it does suggest the BPSAQ is one tool that is worthwhile to use. In summary, the findings provide important data that assert the value of the BPSAQ for nonprofits. The tool has proven to be an encourager of change and a comfortable way to move a board forward.

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Appendix A
BPSAQ Participant Consent Form



University
of Victoria

British Columbia
Canada

Participant Consent Form BPSAQ Participants

You are invited to participate in a study entitled 'How to Move a Board Forward: The Benefit and Impact of the Board Performance Self-Assessment Questionnaire on Nonprofit Organizations' that is being conducted by Andrew J. Renton.

Andrew J. Renton is a Graduate Student in the department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies at the University of Victoria. You may contact him if you have further questions by phone at ----- or email at -----

As a Graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Masters of Education, Leadership Studies. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Tatiana Gounko. You may contact her by telephone at -----.

Purpose and Objectives

This study is situated in the field of nonprofit board development and evaluation. Periodic formal or informal occasions at which the board assesses its own performance have been shown to be hallmarks of effective boards and successful organizations. The Board Performance Self-Assessment Questionnaire (BPSAQ) accessible online at www.boardcheckup.com provides a simple but comprehensive opportunity to evaluate overall board performance. A previous version of the BPSAQ was tested for reliability and validity, but its potential for positive impact and benefits or limitations to specific boards have not been studied.

The purpose of this research project is to reveal the experiences of nonprofit boards working with the BPSAQ by gathering data on their opinions of the benefits, limits, and potential impact of the tool.

Importance of this Research

This research is important because it will contribute essential experiential accounts of nonprofit board members who use the BPSAQ from which to gain insights into the benefits, limitations, and potential positive impact of using this effectiveness assessment tool. All nonprofit organizations and boards should endeavor to operate at their highest potential effectiveness, and tools to measure this capacity are few and generally untested. Establishing whether the BPSAQ is valuable to this aim is something of high importance.

Participants Selection

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a board member of a nonprofit organization who has agreed to complete the BPSAQ as a board and have its key leaders interviewed to reveal their opinions of the benefits, limits, and potential impact of the tool. The BPSAQ can only be useful if all members of a board are able to complete the questionnaire.

What is Involved

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include filling out an online questionnaire that is estimated to take 20 minutes of time.

The BPSAQ will ask you questions about your experience and opinions of the nonprofit organization and its board on which you sit. The tool contains 67 questions that you will answer along a 4-point scale where 1 is “agree strongly” that the issue is a problem in the organization, 2 is “agree somewhat,” 3 is “disagree somewhat,” and 4 is “disagree strongly.” You will have the option to choose “unsure” or “do not know” responses as well. Please see attached “Demo Assessment Survey.”

You will be emailed the link for the online BPSAQ, and given directions for how to fill it out. You may choose to complete the questionnaire on your own time, on any computer you wish, at any location you deem reasonable.

Inconvenience

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you. The only expected inconvenience would be the time it takes to complete the BPSAQ (approximately 20 minutes).

Risks

There are no known or anticipated risks to you related to your participation in this research. However, please be advised that the online survey tool utilized for the BPSAQ uses a web program located in the United States. As such, there is a possibility that information you provide may be accessed without your knowledge or consent by the U.S. government in compliance with the U.S. Patriot Act.

Benefits

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include:

- Participants – Increased knowledge of how to gain greater board effectiveness, including a specified report for your organization.
- Society – Nonprofit organizations serve many necessary functions for society. Gaining new perspective on the value and impact of the BPSAQ could give credibility to a tool that will allow increased effectiveness within nonprofit organizations and their boards.
- State of Knowledge – The present study would be the first to generate opinions of the benefits and impact of the BPSAQ by actual users of the online tool.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will:

- **Not** be included if you withdraw before starting the BPSAQ.
- **Not** be included if you withdraw while completing the BPSAQ, prior to finishing, by leaving the site. If you were to do this, all responses would be erased from the system.
- **Be** included if you complete the BPSAQ, as responses are anonymous and no personal identification is collected by the computerized system.

Researcher's Relationship with Participants

The researcher may have a relationship to potential participants as an acquaintance or colleague. To help prevent this relationship from influencing your decision to participate, the following steps to prevent coercion have been taken.

- The researcher will not be present for any decision made by the board on which you sit to participate in completing the BPSAQ.
- The researcher will ask the board to only participate if the vote to complete the BPSAQ is unanimous (100% agreement). If the board is not unanimous, the researcher asks to only be informed that they board is not going to participate (not given the reason).

Anonymity

In terms of protecting your anonymity, the BPSAQ does not collect your name, but will ask questions regarding your age and gender. Your answers will be collated with everyone else's responses, and are held within the computer system as an organizational grouping. Therefore, no one, including the BPSAQ administrators, will be able to determine your individual responses.

Confidentiality

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected through the use of a secure server utilizing a firewall, password protection, and a Secure Socket Layer (SSL) certificate.

Dissemination of Results

It is anticipated that the results of this study (not your organization's BPSAQ feedback report, but the greater study in which your participation is included) will or may be shared with others in the following ways:

- A Project Report
- Published article or chapter in a book
- Presentation at scholarly meetings
- Presentation in university class
- Internet article
- Directly to participants: The project report will be made available to each participating board to read and discuss with the researcher if they desire

Disposal of Data

Data collected through the BPSAQ will be kept indefinitely on a secure server, utilizing a firewall and password protection, as well as a Secure Socket Layer (SSL) certificate by GoDaddy.com.

Contacts

Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include the researcher, Andrew Renton, or his supervisor, Dr. Tatiana Gounko, referred to at the top of this consent form.

In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics office at the University of Victoria (-----).

CONSENT

This form is meant for your reference. In order to protect anonymity, it does not need to be signed. By completing and submitting the online BPSAQ, your free and informed consent is implied and indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

Please understand that the BPSAQ is also being used as a research tool itself, gathering information on nonprofit organizations across North America. The researcher will read over the BPSAQ Consent information with you, and by completing and submitting the online BPSAQ tool, your free and informed consent is implied in that research.

To make sure that you continue in your consent to participate in this research, in the follow-up email providing the link to the BPSAQ, I will explain that your participation remains voluntary and that you have the right to withdraw at any time without explanation.

Please retain a copy of this letter for your reference.

Appendix B

Interview Participant Consent Form



University
of Victoria

British Columbia
Canada

Participant Consent Form Interview Participants

You are invited to participate in a study entitled 'How to Move a Board Forward: The Benefit and Impact of the Board Performance Self-Assessment Questionnaire on Nonprofit Organizations' that is being conducted by Andrew J. Renton.

Andrew J. Renton is a Graduate Student in the department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies at the University of Victoria and you may contact him if you have further questions by phone at ----- or email at -----

As a Graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Masters of Education, Leadership Studies. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Tatiana Gounko. You may contact her by telephone at -----.

Purpose and Objectives

This study is situated in the field of nonprofit board development and evaluation. Periodic formal or informal occasions at which the board assesses its own performance have been shown to be hallmarks of effective boards and successful organizations. The Board Performance Self-Assessment Questionnaire (BPSAQ) accessible online at www.boardcheckup.com provides a simple but comprehensive opportunity to evaluate overall board performance. A previous version of the BPSAQ was tested for reliability and validity, but its potential for positive impact and benefits or limitations to specific boards have not been studied.

The purpose of this research project is to reveal the experiences of nonprofit boards working with the BPSAQ by gathering data on their opinions of the benefits, limits, and potential impact of the tool.

Importance of this Research

Research of this type is important because it will contribute essential experiential accounts of nonprofit board members who use the BPSAQ from which to gain insights into the benefits, limitations, and potential positive impact of using this effectiveness assessment tool. All nonprofit organizations and boards should endeavor to operate at their highest potential effectiveness, and tools to measure this capacity are few and generally unmeasured. Establishing whether the BPSAQ is valuable to this aim is something of high importance.

To determine if this tool is valuable for actually creating positive change in nonprofit boards would be of great importance to the literature in the nonprofit sector, because the BPSAQ can be further confirmed as beneficial.

Participants Selection

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a board member and key leader of a nonprofit organization who has agreed to complete the BPSAQ as a board and have its key leaders interviewed to reveal their opinions of the benefits, limits, and potential impact of the tool. As a key leader with distinctive insights into the board and organization, your opinions are uniquely valuable.

What is Involved

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include:

- Spending approximately 30-45 minutes to review the BPSAQ feedback reports.
- An interview using open-ended questions. This interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes, and will be conducted in person, over the telephone, or through internet technology such as Skype, iChat, or email. The researcher may use a video camera or audio-tape, as well as write notes, in order to make transcriptions. All video and audio data will be erased once transcription is complete and will not be used in the dissemination of results. The interviews will take place at a location deemed mutually agreeable between the researcher and the interviewee, in an appropriate setting to protect your confidentiality. These interviews should take place within two weeks of receiving the final report on your organization from the BPSAQ.
- Spending 30-45 minutes to review the transcribed interview and make clarifications in person or through email, whichever is preferable to you.

Inconvenience

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you. The only expected inconvenience would be the time it takes to complete the BPSAQ (approximately 20 minutes), review the BPSAQ report (30-45 minutes), complete the interview (30-45 minutes), and review the interview transcription and make clarifications (30-45 minutes). The total time is approximately less than three hours.

Risks

There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research.

Benefits

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include:

- Participants – Increased knowledge of how to gain greater board effectiveness, including a specified report for your organization.
- Society – Nonprofit organizations serve many necessary functions for society. Gaining new perspective on the value and impact of the BPSAQ could give credibility to a valuable tool that will allow increased effectiveness within nonprofit organizations and their boards.
- State of Knowledge – The present study would be the first to generate opinions of the benefits and impact of the BPSAQ by actual users of the online tool.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study the data will only be used with written permission.

_____ Please initial if you agree to have your data collected prior to the time of withdrawal used in the research. If you initial here and do withdraw at any time, I will reconfirm your desire to have your data included and gain additional written permission at that time.

Researcher's Relationship with Participants

The researcher may have a relationship to potential participants as an acquaintance or colleague. To help prevent this relationship from influencing your decision to participate, the following steps to prevent coercion have been taken.

- The researcher will not be present for any decision made by the board on which you sit to participate in completing the BPSAQ.
- The researcher will ask the board to only participate if the vote to complete the BPSAQ is unanimous (100% agreement).
- The researcher will ask the board to only participate if there are at least two key leaders willing to be interviewees in this stage of the research. If there are not at least 2 leaders willing to participate, the researcher asks to only be informed that they board is not going to participate (not given the reason).

On-going Consent

To make sure that you continue to consent to participate in this research, before each interview, the researcher will review the purpose of the study and ensure that you have received a copy of the consent form to review. You will be reminded that: your participation remains completely voluntary; you can decline to answer any or all questions; and you have the right to withdraw at any time, without any consequences or any explanation.

Anonymity

In terms of protecting your anonymity, your name and identifying features will be altered in the dissemination of the results.

Confidentiality

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by names and identifying features being altered for in transcriptions of and in the dissemination of results. Video or audiotapes created during the interview will be deleted immediately following the transcription process.

There is a limit to confidentiality because the name of your nonprofit organization may be identified in the final project report, and it may be assumed which key leaders from your organization participated. There will also be a limit of confidentiality in that those on your own board will know who participated as interviewees. These limits are acknowledged, but believed to be minimal because personal identifiers will not be used and there will be multiple interviewees from each organization.

The electronic transcripts will be stored in password-protected files on the password-protected computer of the investigator during the research. Interview notes made on paper will be stored in a locked filing cabinet at the home office of the researcher, and shredded when the research is complete.

After the research is complete, the electronic data will be encrypted (password-protected) and saved on an external hard drive owned by the principal investigator for up to ten years. The computer and external hard drives will be kept in the home office of the investigator.

Dissemination of Results

It is anticipated that the results of this study will or may be shared with others in the following ways:

- A Project Report
- Published article or chapter in a book
- Presentation at scholarly meetings
- Presentation in university class
- Internet article
- Directly to participants: The project report will be made available to each participating board to read and discuss with the researcher if they desire

Use of Data

Data collected may be useful for future research related to the BPSAQ or board evaluation research.

_____ Please initial if you agree to have the data collected from your interview used in the future by the researcher.

_____ Please initial if you agree to have the data collected from your interview used in the future by the other researchers associated with the BPSAQ.

Disposal of Data

Data from this study will be disposed of in the following ways:

- Paper documents created during the research will be shredded following the research.
- Electronic data will be deleted after a period of ten years.
- Video data and audio data will be deleted immediately following the transcription process.

Contacts

Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include the researcher, Andrew Renton, or his supervisor, Dr. Tatiana Gounko, referred to at the top of this consent form.

In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (-----).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Appendix C

Complete List of BPSAQ Questions

Complete List of BPSAQ Questions

QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR ROLE IN THE ORGANIZATION

- Which of the following roles best describes your position relative to the board of this organization?
- How long have you been in a position to observe the working of the board of this organization?
- On average how many hours a week do you spend carrying out the work that is related to the board?
- How many years experience do you have as a board member or person who has worked closely with boards in *any* organization?
- Your gender?
- Your age?
- How clearly are the expectations of your role communicated to you?
- How do you feel about how well your contributions to the organization's mission are valued?

ISSUES RELATED TO THE BOARD'S OVERALL ROLE & RESPONSIBILITIES

Basic Board Responsibilities

- The board seems to be unclear about what its role ought to be.
- The board and Chief Executive Officer (CEO or Executive Director) sometimes seem to have different ideas about the authority each should have.
- The board tends to act too much as a "rubber stamp" for decisions made by the organization's top management.
- The board gets too involved in making decisions about operational details that ought to be made by management.
- Board members are unclear about their legal liabilities and what protection they have against them.

Board Responsibilities for Planning

- The board has not spent enough time establishing a clear mission and vision for the organization.
- The board never seems to have time to explore external challenges and opportunities that the organization might face.
- The board does not do a very good job of learning about the concerns of external stakeholders who can influence the organization.
- The board does not do a very good job of learning about the concerns of the communities that the organization serves.
- The board rarely holds "creative thinking" sessions aimed at trying to find new ways the organization could develop.
- The board does little to learn about innovations tried by others that might help the organization.
- The board is not provided with a clear enough picture of the organization's internal strengths and limitations in dealing with its external environment.
- The board has not developed a clear, well-researched, strategic plan that sets out broad goals and establishes priorities for the organization.
- Plans exist on paper but they don't get implemented at the operational level, i.e. other concerns drive what actually gets done.

The Board's Role in Performance Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The board does not do a satisfactory job of assessing how well the organization is achieving its mission. • The board does not get enough of the right kind of information to give it a clear picture of how well the organization is doing. • The board does not ensure that an analysis is done of serious risks that the organization might face. • The board does not do a very good job of ensuring that the organization's finances are being managed soundly. • The board does not regularly and systematically carry out assessments of the CEO's performance (e.g. Executive Director, President, etc.).
The Board's Role in Fundraising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The board seems confused about its role in fundraising for the organization. • The board has not approved an overall strategy for fundraising. • The board has problems engaging in actual fundraising activities.
ISSUES RELATED TO THE BOARD'S FORMAL STRUCTURES AND OPERATING PROCESSES	
The Formal Structure of the Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The by-laws that provide the rules within which the board operates are in need of a thorough review. • We don't have a board policy manual or we have one which is badly in need of revision. • The board seems too large and cumbersome to enable it to act as an effective decision-making body. • Job descriptions for the positions of board members and board officers (e.g., Chair, Vice-Chair, Treasurer, Secretary, etc.) are nonexistent or not well understood. • Administrative support for the board (secretarial assistance, record keeping, assistance in arranging meetings, etc.) is inadequate. • The board lacks access to potentially useful information and communications technology (e.g. computers, software, internet and the web). • Most board members don't make much use of the information and communications technology made available to them. • Some board committees are not all that useful. • Some board committees are unclear about their responsibilities and/or authority. • Some board officers and chairs of committees lack the training or experience needed to meet the demands of their position. • Some committees have members who contribute very little or don't have enough experience to be of much help.
Board Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The agenda for board meetings does not get into the hands of board members in time for them to familiarize themselves with the issues before the meeting. • When the agenda does come, there is too much information to digest or not enough to adequately familiarize board members about the issues. • The agenda for meetings is too full of "routine" motions or items "for information only" so there isn't time to discuss more important matters. • The agenda items of greatest importance often come up too late in the meetings when board members are too tired to concentrate on them.

Board Meetings (continued)

- We have problems when it comes to attendance at board meetings; too many members miss too many meetings.
- Board meetings often go on too long.
- Once the board has finished discussing something, it is not clear who is going to do what and when.
- There is too much unconstructive arguing among some members during meetings.
- Meetings are run too informally, for example with more than one person talking at once, no time limits on discussions, etc.
- Meetings stick too much to formal “rules of order” so that thorough, probing discussions are discouraged.
- A few members seem to dominate discussions and this discourages quieter board members from contributing.

ISSUES RELATED TO THE COMPOSITION OF THE BOARD AND DEVELOPMENT OF BOARD MEMBERS

- Looking at the board as a whole, there is not enough “new blood” coming on to it to bring fresh energy and ideas.
- Finding high quality new board members is a problem for us.
- We do not pay enough attention to making sure we get the mix of skills and backgrounds we need in the new board members we recruit.
- The diversity of publics with and interest in this organization is not well represented in the make-up of the board.
- We don’t do a very good job of orienting and training new board members.
- There is not enough ongoing development and training for regular board members.

ISSUES RELATED TO THE INFORMAL CULTURE OF THE BOARD

- Too many board members seem unwilling to devote much time or effort to the work of the board.
- There are many differences of opinion among board members that never get resolved. The board doesn’t handle conflict very well.
- The board does not regularly and systematically assess its own performance and change itself if it thinks it can improve.
- Board members tend not to be involved in representing the organization to the community or bringing the concerns of that community into the organization.
- As far as I know, many board members have contacts among people who might help the organization but they are not encouraged, or given the opportunity, to make use of them.
- Individual board members with skills and knowledge that might be of use to the organization are rarely approached informally for their assistance.
- Little effort is made to help board members get to know one another and develop “team spirit” as a group.

BOARD LEADERSHIP ISSUES

- There is a kind of “inner group” that seems to run things on the board and those who are not part of it sometimes feel left out.
- The board chair tends to be overly controlling.
- The board chair seems to have her/his own “agenda” which is not always shared by others.
- The board chair is a bit too passive and disorganized in her/his leadership style.
- The board chair’s meeting leadership skills are not as strong as they could be.
- As far as I know, the board chair is reluctant to speak to board members who don’t carry out their responsibilities properly.
- As far as I know, the relationship between the CEO and the board chair is quite formal; they don’t talk much “off the record.”
- As far as I know, the CEO rarely consults individual board members for informal advice or assistance.
- There seems to be a lack of trust between the CEO and the board.
- The information that the CEO provides the board to help it make decisions is sometimes inadequate or too slanted.
- The CEO seems to be trying to dominate or control the board too much.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION’S OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS

- All in all, how good a job do you think the board does?
- How effective is the organization in achieving its mission?
- What is the current state of the organization’s finances?
- How efficiently run is the organization in terms of not wasting money?
- How strong is the organization’s ability to learn and innovate when change is needed?
- What is the state of morale among those who work and/or volunteer for this organization?
- As far as you know, what is the reputation of the organization among concerned stakeholders in the community?

Appendix D

Sample Anonymized *BPSAQ Final Report*



Board Performance Self-Assessment Questionnaire Final Report

(Within a week you will also receive an email including the item by item summary of the responses to the questionnaire.)

Introduction

It is important to emphasize that the purpose of the Self-Assessment exercise is NOT to suggest that mistakes have been made or that people are at fault in some way. They are intended to suggest issues that need further exploration in the same way that medical tests provide doctors with information on how to improve your health.

This instrument measures the extent to which the respondents perceived the board as effective in each of five general areas in which board performance might be changed. The areas are:

- The clarity of the board's role and its effectiveness in carrying out its basic due diligence responsibilities—those of policy setting, planning, fiscal and legal oversight, risk mitigation and performance assessment.
- The adequacy of the board's formal structures and operating processes—size, committee structure and meeting effectiveness;
- The suitability of the make-up of the board's membership and the quality of the orientation and development of board members;
- The degree of support provided by the informal culture of the board (shared, taken-for-granted ways of thinking and acting that members might not be conscious of).
- The effectiveness of the leadership provided by the board chair and the organization's CEO.

Note that if a significant number of board members “agree strongly” or “agree somewhat” that an item applies to their board, this merely suggests a need to investigate further to establish whether a serious problem actually exists or not. Sometimes what is *seen* to be a problem turns out to be due to a misperception or lack of knowledge of the situation which can be easily corrected through better communication. It is also the case that not all boards are the same and a problem in one may not be much of a problem in another. However, genuinely serious problems may well be identified and it is these that you should focus on.

Results

Response Rate

The number of completed questionnaires received was: ___

This translates into a response rate of **83%** based on the total number of people you said would be asked to complete the questionnaire.

Number of items answered as "Not Sure"

Percentage of respondents who checked "Not Sure" for 20 or more items: 0.0%

Checking an item as "Not Sure" indicates that the respondent was either quite new to the board and didn't have a sense of how it works yet, or had not received adequate orientation to being a board member or to working with the board. If 25% or more of all those responding to the questionnaire have 20 or more items checked as 'Not Sure' a red warning button appears beside the number. This indicates a need for a major board development effort. This effort should include both board members AND those whose work relates to the board in any way. A formal board orientation program in which the topics covered by the questionnaire are discussed can go a long way toward creating a team with a common understanding of how the board works.

Overall Score

The total score for the Board Performance Self-Assessment Questionnaire (BPSAQ) is calculated as follows:

- "Agree strongly" answer is scored 1;
- "Agree somewhat"—2;
- "Disagree somewhat"—3;
- "Disagree strongly"—4.
- "Not Sure" is scored 0.

Adding together the scores for all items and dividing them by the number of respondents provides an average total score for your board.

In general, the higher the average total score the greater the probability that the board is carrying out its governance function well.

The Average Total Score for this board is: 223.41 ●

Interpretation:

● **222 – 272:** Very likely to be a highly effective board. Only minor 'tune ups' needed to maintain high performance.

● **171 – 221:** A moderately effective board. May need to make some changes and undergo further development.

● **120 – 170:** A board that is probably facing a number of major challenges in many areas. A large scale effort at reform should be undertaken.

● **68 – 119:** A board that is probably experiencing extremely serious difficulties in carrying out its role in the governance function. Wholesale efforts to change in all the dimensions of board effectiveness are likely necessary.

Top 10 Strengths in Board Performance

These are the questions that had the greatest number of respondents checking "Disagree strongly". That is, they are seen by most as being well performed, needing little change. To get a clearer picture of what they mean, try reading the statements below in a positive, rather than negative, way. For example, "the board seems to be unclear about what its role and to be" would read, "the board is clear about what its role ought to be".

- **The board tends to act too much as a "rubber stamp" for decisions made by the organization's top management.**
- **Looking at the board as a whole, there is not enough "new blood" coming on to it to bring fresh energy and ideas.**
- **There is a kind of "inner group" that seems to run things on the board and those who are not part of it sometimes feel left out.**
- **The board chair seems to have her/his own "agenda" which is not always shared by others.**
- **The board chair is a bit too passive and disorganized in her/his leadership style.**
- **The board chair's meeting leadership skills are not as strong as they could be.**
- **The board never seems to have time to explore external challenges and opportunities that the organization might face.**
- **The board does little to learn about innovations tried by others that might help the organization.**
- **The board seems too large and cumbersome to enable it to act as an effective decision-making body.**
- **The board seems to be unclear about what its role ought to be.**

Top 10 Greatest Challenges for Effective Board Performance

These are the questions that had the greatest number of respondents checking "agree strongly". That is, they are seen by at least some respondents as being serious problems that should be discussed:

- **Finding high quality new board members is a problem for us.**
- **The diversity of publics with an interest in this organization is not well represented in the make-up of the board.**
- **The board does not do a very good job of ensuring that the organization's finances are being managed soundly.**
- **The board has not approved an overall strategy for fundraising.**
- **Looking at the board as a whole, there is not enough "new blood" coming on to it to bring fresh energy and ideas.**
- **We do not pay enough attention to making sure we get the mix of skills and backgrounds we need in the new board members we recruit.**
- **Administrative support for the board (secretarial assistance, record keeping, assistance in arranging meetings, etc.) is inadequate.**
- **Once the board has finished discussing something, it is not clear who is going to do what and when.**
- **We have problems when it comes to attendance at board meetings; too many members miss too many meetings.**
- **The board seems confused about its role in fund raising for the organization.**

Scores for the Component Parts of Board Effectiveness

Of greater importance than the overall score on the BPSAQ is the scores obtained in the various topic areas that make it up. These groupings of questions represent the various dimensions of board effectiveness. It is possible for a board to score well in some of these but have challenges in others. It is therefore critical that the areas of possible weakness be identified and special emphasis be placed on discussing them.

Note: The first number below refers to the average score for all those responding to the questions. The color beside the number indicates how serious the situation might be for that area of board effectiveness.

- = **A very serious problem**
- = **A moderately serious problem**
- = **Few serious problems**

The second number refers to how widely the perceptions of those responding differ from one another. The color beside the number indicates how extensive the differences in perceptions are:

- = **A very wide range of perceptions**
- = **A moderate range of perceptions**
- = **A minimal range of perceptions**

In order to ensure confidentiality, it is not possible to show here the extent to which the perceptions of board members differed from those of non-board members. However, in discussing degree of difference figure, it is very important to raise the matter of the extent to which it represents differences in the perceptions of these two groups. One of the most serious problems of governance occurs when board members and members of the management team or others they deal with have widely differing expectations of one another.

1. Clarity of the board's role and its effectiveness in meeting basic due diligence responsibilities (5 items)

Average score: 17.8 ●

These items represent how much clarity there is about what the board should be responsible for and the proper role of the board. It is important here to look especially at how the perceptions of board members differ from those of members of the management team.

15 – 20: The board is seen as being quite clear about its basic responsibilities and what its role ought to be

10 – 15: The board is seen as being moderately clear about its basic responsibilities and what its role ought to be, but some differences exist that may need some work.

5 – 10: The board is seen as experiencing a considerable lack of clarity regarding its basic responsibilities and what its role ought to be. This is a high priority problem that requires considerable attention.

Degree of difference between scores: 0.61 ●

2. Board responsibilities for planning and policy oversight (9 items)

Average score: 28.9 ●

28 – 36: The board is seen as quite clear about its role in planning for the organization's future and feels it is doing a good job of it.

20 – 28: The board may be doing a moderately good job of carrying out its planning function but there are some areas that need work.

11 – 20: Many major problems are seen as existing for the board in grappling with its role in planning.

Degree of difference between scores: 0.87 ●

3. Board's role in performance assessment (5 items)

Average score: 14.1 ●

15 – 20 The board feels it is doing a very good job of tracking how well the organization is doing.

10 – 15 The board feels it is doing a moderately good job in this area but needs some work.

5 – 10 Major problems are seen to exist for the board in carrying out its planning function.

Degree of difference between scores: 0.92 ●

4. Board's role in fundraising (3 items)

Average score: 7.2 ●

9 – 12: The board is seen as quite clear about its role in fund raising and is doing a good job of it.

6 – 9: The board is seen as either uncertain about its role in fund raising or there are problems in the way it carries out that role.

3 – 6: There appear to be major problems for the board in dealing with its role in fund raising.

Degree of difference between scores: 1.06 ●

5. Issues related to the formal structure of the board (11 items)

Average score: 37.7 ●

33 – 44 The board is seen as having very satisfactory structural arrangements.

21 – 33 The board is seen as having a moderately satisfactory structure but with some problems that need addressing.

11 – 21 The board is seen as having many major problems with its structural arrangements.

Degree of difference between scores: 0.77 ●

6. Issues Related to Board Meetings (11 items)

Average score: 35.8 ●

33 – 44: The board's meetings are seen as running very effectively.

21 – 33: The board's meetings are seen as moderately effective but with some problems that need to be addressed.

11 – 21: The board is seen as having many major problems with the way its meetings are being run.

Degree of difference between scores: 0.84 ●

7. Issues related to the composition of the board and board development (6 items)

Average score: 15.4 ●

19 – 24: The board's composition and level of development is seen as satisfactory.

13 – 19: The board's composition and level of development is seen as moderately satisfactory but with some problems that need to be addressed.

6 – 13: The board is seen as experiencing major problems with how it is made up and the quality of orientation and training provided to its members.

Degree of difference between scores: 1.07 ●

8. Issues related to the informal culture of the board (7 items)

Average score: 23.6 ●

21 – 28: The board is seen as having an informal culture that contributes well to its effectiveness.

14 – 21: The board is seen as having an informal culture that moderately contributes to its effectiveness but there are some cultural issues that need to be addressed.

7 - 14: The board is seen as having a seriously dysfunctional informal culture.

Degree of difference between scores: 0.81 ●

9. Board leadership issues (11 items)

Average score: 41.4 ●

33 – 44: The board is seen as having strong and effective leadership from its chair and CEO.

21 – 33: The board is seen as having moderately effective leadership but with some problems in that area that need to be addressed.

11 – 21: The board is seen as experiencing many serious leadership problems.

Degree of difference between scores: 0.50 ●

Appendix E

“Where Do You Go From Here?” Suggestions



The Board Performance Self-Assessment Questionnaire

Where Do You Go From Here?

The results of the Board Performance Self-Assessment Questionnaire summarized above will give you some ideas about possible difficulties that could be keeping your board from performing at its best. How these results are *used* will determine how valuable they might be in helping to make the governance function of your organization as effective as it can be. Here are some suggestions for getting the most from this project.

1. If possible, create a small "Board Self-Assessment Implementation Task Force" to take the lead in this final phase. (Alternatively, this job could be taken on by an existing board committee such as a Governance or Executive Committee).
2. This committee should choose a chair -- possibly the person who acted as Project Coordinator in getting the questionnaire completed.
3. It should review the findings and discuss the best way to present them to the board as a whole.
4. A special board meeting, or retreat, should be organized to review the findings. If possible, all those who were originally asked to participate should be invited, e.g. in addition to board members, ask top managers, senior volunteers, etc.
5. The special board meeting should proceed as follows:
 - A. The Chair of the meeting should begin by reviewing the reasons for engaging in this self-assessment exercise and go on to make the following points:
 - The discussion should *not* take the form of blaming anyone for any of the issues identified.
 - It is possible that some problems, on further discussion, will be found to be simply the result of lack of knowledge or experience on the part of some participants. These can be corrected by better communications.

- When there *is* a strong consensus that certain issues are real problems it is important not to jump to conclusions about why they exist or what should be done about them. Instead, they should be carefully analyzed. We therefore recommend that this special board meeting *not* be used to make decisions but only to seek consensus on issues and identify possible solutions. The Task Force would promise to take this input and return later with well thought out formal recommendations for change, if needed.
- B. Discuss the significance of the results obtained in each of the topic areas covered in this Final Report.
- Response rate
 - Percentage of "Not Sures"
 - Total score
 - The 10 things we do best
 - The 10 things we do the least well
 - Results for each of the nine distinct elements of board effectiveness.
- C. If the group is large enough, consider breaking into smaller groups to discuss the following questions, otherwise pose them in a plenary format:
- i. What are the issues that the most need working on in terms of importance and immediacy?
 - ii. For each of the top priority issues, why do they exist? (The meeting should be reminded that the reasons may not always be simple. For example, if there is strong agreement that board meetings are too long, this could be for many reasons: a failure to establish and enforce time limits for agenda items, board members being unprepared, poorly prepared committee reports, too much time spent on routine leaving important policy issues until late in the meeting, etc.)
 - iii. What positive, future-oriented changes might be made to end the problems?
6. The Implementation Task Force should take the input provided at the special board meeting and use it to prepare a series of recommendations for change along with supporting arguments for them. These would be brought to a formal meeting of the board for discussion and approval.
7. Finally, responsibility for tracking the outcomes of these changes should be allocated to a person or committee who will report at the end of a year on the degree of improvement in the governance process. This should signal the beginning of a process of board self-evaluation that occurs every year.