

# Our Antioch University BOARD OF GOVERNORS

FEBRUARY 2018

## A CONVERSATION WITH CHARLOTTE ROBERTS AND MARTHA SUMMERVILLE



In December 2017, Board Chair, Charlotte Roberts, PhD., and Board member Martha Summerville, PhD., met with Laurien Alexandre, PhD, to talk about their recently published book, *The Mindful Board: Mastering the Art of Conscious Governance* (2016). Here are excerpts from their engaging conversation.

**Q: Please describe your experiences with boards because that will lead into what prompted you to write this book.**

Charlotte: I was living in Philadelphia in the 1980s. I was part of a group of women who wanted to start moving women's presence – building a 'good ol' girls' network as

opposed to the good ol' boys. One of our goals was to get more women on boards.

My first board was the Domestic Abuse Projects of Delaware County and then the Philadelphia Women's Network. That's how I started becoming a board member and realized that it was more than just leadership, it was about really caring for the organizations. I served on the Board of Friends Central in Philadelphia. I cannot remember all of the different boards I served on, but that's how I got started. My first higher education board was Guilford College. That's how Martha [Summerville] and I met. I'm a member of the Society of Friends, and I got to Guilford College through my Quaker connection. I got to Antioch through a recommendation by Martha, who was on the then Antioch New England Board of Trustees. The mission of Guilford and the Society of Friends are aligned with the mission of Antioch.

Martha: I was involved with a non-profit in New Haven, CT, in the late '80s and early '90s, and ended up chairing that board for several years. I learned the importance of good governance and that, when a board is not as engaged as it should be, the cost is not only to the organization but also to its constituents.

By the early '90s, I was doing a fair amount of work with boards through my volunteer work. In my professional life, I was called on to support the board development efforts of the organizations I worked with until 2000 when I started my own consulting practice. Since then, working with governing boards has been a major focus of my practice. I joined the Guilford College Board in 1999 and that's how I met Charlotte [Roberts].

**Q: Given your backgrounds and experiences, what was it that led you to the recognition of and realizations about mindful governance, mindful boards? Could you lead us to that realization of the need for the mindful governance approach?**

Charlotte: This model has been 10 years in development. We were thinking it, living it, and practicing it at the same time before we wrote about it. It was like another dissertation!

Martha: Finishing my dissertation feels easier than this was because we were evolving while doing it.

Charlotte: Both of us could have earned doctorates in this whole process of developing our mindful governance model. Did you realize that? I didn't realize that, until just now.

So, back to the question. We were developing this model. When we joined the Guilford College Board, it was a very traditional white, male board, and was a consent board. We realized that we didn't want to be a part of a consent board. Our thinking was, if we didn't have a voice, there was no reason for us to be there. There were a lot of people our age, although all of us were younger then, who were thinking the same thing we were and having side-bar conversations.

Martha and I started transforming that board. We wrote our first booklet at that time, *Standing in the River: Applying Quaker Practices to the Work of the Board*. A lot of people didn't understand the Quaker meeting process and so we wrote the book that compares the two – Quaker business meeting processes and corporate America business meeting processes. That's the first book we wrote about governance and about how you begin to have the conversations that you need to have.

Boards need to have different kinds of conversations – but it's often difficult because they don't know how to have them, or they're afraid to have them. We're committed to developing a model of different kinds of conversations.

Martha: We wrote *Standing in the River* after we'd become concerned that we were not having full-group conversations when we needed to have them. It was a typical board in the sense that it didn't meet very often, and it was struggling with how to have those hard conversations.

As well, there was recognition that the context was changing – both the external context as well as the internal context, and that boards like the Guilford board needed to more fully understand that. We could bring certain perspectives, but we needed other people to bring their perspectives as well.

Charlotte: Keep in mind that this was the time of WorldCom, Tyco, Enron, and huge board debacles. We were like 'Oh my gosh, it's happening to corporations as well. The consent board is a risk.' Martha and I knew that we were on the right track but we did not have the model yet. We were learning how to assert our model as opposed to researching and reporting on other people's models.

Martha: If you were looking for literature about the non-profit world at that time, there weren't many people talking about this. They weren't asking those hard questions. That has changed dramatically. There is a lot out there now that advocates for cultures of inquiry and dialogue and deep conversations.

At the time, it was as if the models we kept encountering operated in a single lane, as if all the traffic was going in one direction and without a lot of divergence or creative thinking. Take the metaphor of a holiday tree: most models of board evolution and development are just layers of ornaments, but the tree stays the same. We knew that in order for the board to be able to meet the challenges that were continually emerging, the tree had to change. You don't get to where you need to be if you have the same tree and simply layer on new ornaments. You have to change the tree.

**Q: You use expressions like “single lane” and “old white boys’ network” and so forth. Clearly, there’s some connection between the ability to engage in cultures of inquiry and fearless conversations and having a pluralistic, diverse board in composition and structure. Do you make an explicit argument connecting it to diversity in boards and inclusion in terms of membership relative to mindfulness?**

Martha: As a board moves along the continuum of development to mindfulness, diversity and inclusion become evermore important. It's not just backgrounds and ethnicity, it's the ability to bring in different experiences, different cultural experiences, and with that, relationships have to change as well. So, it's not only the composition, it's the ability to think differently. Diversity brings with it the responsibility for healthy, strong, trustworthy relationships so that you get the best decisions. It's particularly true as you move from a working board to the strategic and then from the strategic to the mindful. You will not get there with the same frame.”

Charlotte: We talk about inclusion and diversity. How do we even begin to try and understand each other's mental models and draw that and appreciate it? Diversity can mean lots of things. Diversity of thought, diversity of mental models, let alone when we achieve different cultural backgrounds and have deep diversity. It's often difficult for boards to engage. A lot of skills-building is needed as well. How do I even begin to appreciate your model let alone to understand and adopt some of it?

**Q: I don't think of stages as a nice linear line nor do the two of you. Your model of the board continuum lays out, for example, when a board is moving from, say, strategic to mindful, there are still elements of a working or strategic board. How do you see board movement on the continuum?**

Charlotte: It's like eggs inside of eggs inside of eggs. You will always have a basic consent board for fiduciary responsibilities. You will always have a working board that is concerned about operations. The board's responsibility will always be there. Once you can activate strategic thinking, which is not easy to do, you want to always have fiduciary duties and knowledge of operations present. Always. We use the term 'expanded consciousness.' You keep broadening the mind and capabilities of the board. You have to have people who love that, who love learning and love leading in different venues, different arenas.

Martha: To give a concrete example, think about a board finance committee. When you're at the Consent level, you are rubber-stamping whatever the finance people are saying about the organization's finances. When you're at the Working board level, you're questioning things. When you start to move along the continuum, you're still approving the operating budget, but now you're also asking different questions about the numbers because you're thinking about the impact and about unintended consequences. That's one of the hallmarks of the Strategic and Mindful Board, that willingness to consider unintended consequences and things you can't quite put your finger on, but you're willing to ask the questions.

**Q: Let's try to tackle some of the challenges to moving a board forward on the continuum. What is the biggest challenge in moving forward or expanding the board's capacity?**

Charlotte: Skills and willingness. Consider the skill-set and the ability to think strategically. I don't believe that everyone can do this. Some people are born with a gift to think strategically. They play chess in their mind all the time. They can think of strategic moves and can think out five moves ahead. There are other people who can learn to do it, and then there are some people who don't have a strategic bone in their body. 'He is so tactful, bless his little heart.' Does a board have enough people who have the needed skills?

And by willingness, some people love the tangible nature of the working board, you count things, you measure things. With a strategic board, you have to deal in ambiguity and uncertainty and you embrace it. Does a board have enough people willing to move to that less tactical, less tangible world?

Martha: I would echo what Charlotte said in terms of willingness and skill. I'd also say the biggest challenges are the deeply held beliefs about leadership and change. If people believe that the board chair is omnipotent, then you have a problem. It's really hard to have leadership by a group when you defer to a CEO or board chair all of the time. You can think you're a Working Board, but you're still deferring. So, when you start talking about transforming yourself into a Strategic Board, you bump into the models of what it actually takes to transform. And oh, by the way, it's not only about the person sitting next to you, it's about yourself as well.

**Q: So this leads to talking about power and authority. These elements are significant in your model because one would have to be willing to question power, question authority and presume all voices should be at the table and not one should be marginalized. That's sort of the modus operandi of so many organizational structures – not just boards. It's getting people to question in a civil, respectful, graceful way, it seems to me. That's my next question for you.**

Martha: This is particularly true when you're in a situation where money matters, and I'm not just talking about non-profits. As the saying goes, he or she with the most toys wins, and that dynamic plays out in the boardroom."

**Q: Boards often recruit new members based on expertise; e.g. we need someone with legal expertise or business acumen. Based on your work, it would seem that there is an equally important component in terms of recruiting people who not only have expertise in content, but who also have a skill set around strategic capacity to visionary capacity, those who have concrete skills, and those who thrive in ambiguity. How do you bring in those ways of being, that expertise, when you're interviewing board member prospects or seeking them out?**

Charlotte: We would like those polarities in the same person – flexibility, agility. So hopefully, you have

nominated someone who has these traits. Then there's the number of people interviewing them who ask different types of questions to see if indeed they have experience in being practical, financial, tactical, and visionary. It's in the interviewing process that you do that.

Martha: Building on what Charlotte just said, I think part of it is also chemistry. People need to feel comfortable with each other. You have to find out as much as you can about people's comfort levels with making decisions, and also working one's way through that process. You can find that out by asking people lots of questions and listening deeply.

**Q: Have you created board assessment tools around the continuum, both at the board level and at the individual board member level? Are you developing some type of instrument that might help in recruitment and then once someone is on, helping to develop assessments that facilitate board professional development?**

Charlotte: Yes, we've been doing that. It took us 10 years to get this model. It will take us however long to get the assessment. We have thought about it. We have the beginning of one.

Martha: Charlotte and I have developed board evaluation tools over the years since we've known each other. We've administered them and done the data-crunching using those tools. We also know that board tools are getting commoditized. We have just gone through an experience with a board where we did an evaluation using an outside vendor. It always comes back to what you do with the results. Are people doing it to meet a fiduciary requirement of some assessment or are they really doing it to learn something? I believe more and more that you need those kinds of questions, but it's more about getting people in the room talking about those questions than filling out the assessment.

**Q: Both of you are governors on the Antioch University Board and, in fact, Charlotte, you are the Board Chair. Martha, you had originally chaired the AUNE Trustee Board. In what ways are you trying to move our board along the continuum? I'm not asking you where you think the board is right now, but more how are you working with our beloved institution to incorporate the fullest extensiveness of the continuum articulated in your book?**

Charlotte: We have a really smart board. We have an incredibly bright, talented, gifted board with the kind of flexible people we've been talking about. It's stunning to me. For me, I'd say it is about asking the questions and it is about bringing people from the outside to sort of whack you upside the head. Being really open to the process, asking the really difficult questions and saying 'thank you' to the person who asks the undiscussable question. We have a couple of board members who do that naturally. They are gifted at it, but the whole room gasps when they ask questions. It takes practice just saying 'thank you for the question' and being willing to stay put in that difficult conversation. I'd say that's what we've been doing.

Martha: I think one of the things we're doing is asking ourselves, 'what are the qualifications we need to be looking for, given the context of the University and of higher education? What are these characteristics? What are we looking for?' Do you have to be in love with Antioch to be on this Board, or do you have to have the capacity to fall in love?

Charlotte: I like that.

Martha: We all agreed you don't have to be in love with the University to join us. You just have to have the capacity to fall in love and feel very committed and deeply engaged, which I believe we do. We've also been talking about the importance of the board's continuing education, and we're going to have a conversation about a board evaluation, which should be interesting. We're very conscious as we look at potential candidates to find out who are they as individuals, what is their story, who knows them, how will they join us at this critical time in our history and do they have the heart? Is their heart open to who we are? They don't need to know about us. They just need to want to know us.

**Q: I love that. So, we've gone through my questions. Let me ask the two of you, is there something about the model you're presenting that you would particularly like us to have a conversation about that we haven't touched on?**

Charlotte: For me, it would be leadership by the group. In most boards, it's still hierarchical, and so, the Chair and Vice-Chair are still the ones seen as having all the power – especially with a governing board where every one of us is responsible for the health and wellness of the institution in perpetuity. A Chancellor's Executive Team has a time frame of the next five to ten years, but when it comes to the board, it's in perpetuity. How do we share the leadership among the whole group – anyone can ask a question, anyone can answer a question, anyone can lead and for heaven's sake, if you have some expertise we didn't know about, step forward and tell us.

Leadership by the group is really about honoring and respecting the people who are on the board so that they can make a meaningful contribution. I think that's the thing that Martha and I have seen, people who serve on a board, even when they're paid hundreds of thousands of dollars and tons of stock to serve, they still want to make a meaningful contribution. They don't want to simply show up and have cocktails. For me, the leadership by the group allows each person to have that sense of meaningfulness – that what they're doing is making a difference. That has always been one of the big components for me.

Martha: One of the big ones for me is consciousness. We see our model as a model of conscious governance. It's tied to leadership of the group, it's tied to fearless engagement, it is being attuned at multiple levels all the time. The other thing that's important to me in the model, is that as you develop and grow, as you move along the continuum, your core identity is a developmental model and your identity changes. Your internal identity, your core characteristics may be the same. You're still working for the same organization. The organization is changing and along with that, your collective identity develops and moves on. I think it is about understanding that this is a developmental process that you, personally, will change, and the group's identity will also change.

Charlotte: Did we give you enough to write about?

**Q: Oh my gosh, yes. Did you enjoy talking about it?**

Charlotte and Martha: "Yes!"

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**Charlotte Roberts, Ph.D.** is an executive consultant, speaker and writer who focuses on organizations' sustainability and competitiveness. She is President of Blue Fire Partners, Inc. a management consultant company. She is co-author of two cutting-edge leadership books, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization* and *The Dance of Change: The Challenges of Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations*. In 2000, *Schools That Learn* was published for educators, parents and people who care about education.

Dr. Roberts' background includes a Bachelor's degree in Education and a Master's degree in Human Development from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro where she later served on the faculty. While working for SmithKline & French Pharmaceuticals in sales and sales training, she graduated from the Management Program at the Wharton School of Business. She recently completed a Ph.D. in Consciousness and Spirituality from Saybrook Graduate School.

Charlotte has been an executive consultant for over 15 years, coaching executives and executive teams to achieve a higher level of performance as a group and as leaders of vision-driven organizations, learning that as the executive team evolves, so does the culture of the organization. Her work in systems and leadership extends to boards of organizations providing a customized self-evaluation process for the group as well as individual board members. From their evaluation, Charlotte helps the board define and implement their development agenda based on an evolutionary model she and her colleagues have identified.

Roberts currently returned to the board of trustees at Guilford College after serving 12 years earlier. Former board service includes the American Compensation Association, Friends School of Philadelphia, and Women's Way of Philadelphia. When Charlotte is not working, you'll find her cruising on a jet ski on Lake Norman, walking, or playing ball with her cairn terrier, Tess.

**Martha Summerville, Ph.D.** joined the Board in 2014. She is an executive consultant with extensive experience in organization design and development, human resources and education. As president of Summerville Consulting LLC, founded in 2000, she specializes in an array of work related to governing board development and executive effectiveness, which includes board retreat facilitation, board self-evaluation, senior team development, and board-CEO partnership.

Prior to founding her consulting practice, Martha held management positions in organization development and strategic human resources at Aetna, Inc., in Hartford, in the health business, financial services, and corporate human resources. Prior to Aetna she held management positions in several Connecticut hospitals.

Martha served on the Guilford College Board of Trustees from 1999 to 2008, and then from 2009 to the present. Martha was the founding board chair of the AUNE Board of Trustees.

She holds a B.A. from Guilford College, Master of Divinity from Yale University, Master of Human Services Administration from Antioch University (O&M), and a Ph.D. in Adult Learning from the University of Connecticut. In 2007, she received the "Outstanding Professional Award" from UConn's NEAG School of Education.

She and her husband, Dr. Jeffrey W. Summerville (AUNE '85 and '01), live in New Haven, CT, in their 1894 house they affectionately refer to as the "casa in restauro perpetuale."

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