

TANGO FOR BEGINNERS

A GUIDE TO USING SHARED GOVERNANCE TO WORK THROUGH THE TWISTS AND TURNS OF HIGHER-EDUCATION RELATIONSHIPS

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“*Courageous Gardening* is a masterpiece because it thoughtfully and methodically explains what it means to be an equity-minded leader, and because it provides case studies and activities so that the reader is actively engaged in the process of understanding how to, what to, and why. The workbook facilitates application and provides the reader with an opportunity to critically examine their own landscape, and to work to create cultivating change or a new landscape. This is required reading, especially chapters 5 and 10—which once read, you will find yourself referring back to again and again. Highly recommend: 5 stars.” – *Usbeevii King, Assistant Vice Provost, Faculty Engagement and Development, New York University*

SAMPLE

REVIEWS

“In *Tango for Beginners*, Turell and Thompson use the apt analogy of a complex dance to elucidate the challenges of shared governance. The framing of the challenge is especially sharp, as it honors the roles of both leaders and followers, in contrast to many works that focus on the leader only. The work reflects a rich understanding of multiple campus constituencies and addresses each aspect of potential conflict from each perspective. Turell and Thompson bring insights from their extensive interviews with multiple groups, making the book appropriate for most higher-education audiences. The reflection exercises encourage the reader to note defensive or territorial behaviors, to question assumptions of dishonesty or ill intentions, and to keep the purpose—educating students – at the center of all discussions. They also call attention to hierarchy and privilege, challenging us to ensure that those who stay quiet are given voice and to avoid letting louder individuals dominate or speak for others. The book concludes with a series of case studies and reflection questions that allow readers to practice their newfound insights and work through some common scenarios that bring shared governance into focus. I highly recommend this resource to all with a commitment to shared governance, shared purpose, and a desire to reach better decisions through inclusive processes.” — Sara L. Zeigler, Professor of Political Science, Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs, Eastern Kentucky University

“This book will be very helpful to college and university leaders who want to gain a better understanding of the meaning and role of shared governance in higher education. The authors’ masterful use of dance as a metaphor is an effective approach to illustrating the importance of shared governance in leading an institution. The case studies will be especially helpful to the reader in stimulating productive discussions about critical aspects of leadership.”—Freeman A. Hrabowski, III, President Emeritus, UMBC

“*Tango for Beginners* captures the importance of trust, communication, and understanding the role each of us plays to effectively develop, sustain, and ultimately use shared governance in the increasingly complex landscape of higher education. Dr. Turell and Dr. Thompson have written a useful and timely workbook for beginners as well as a reminder for experienced academics of the importance of collaboration, transparency, and data-informed strategy setting within our institutions... The case studies provide an engaging opportunity to distance oneself from a current setting and perhaps recognize ourselves and our situations in a new light to work for the common good.” — Mary Strey, VPAA and Dean of Faculty, Central College

“In *Tango for Beginners*, Turell and Thompson offer a powerful and fascinating guide to engaging higher education’s most complex issue: shared governance. So aptly titled, the book is about the communication and relationship dance in the life of the academy by all stakeholders, which is so necessary to advance institutional mission and strategic priorities. [Readers are addressed] in a language that is thoughtful and insightful and that resonates with our common experiences as learners, teachers, scholars, advocates, activists, and administrators. *Shared governance is not the enemy. Shared governance is a friend when managed well.* ...*Tango for Beginners* is a must-read for all of us in higher education who are deeply committed to the service of our institutions and the public good.” —Peter O. Nwosu, Ph.D. Professor of Communication Studies and President, State University of New York (SUNY) at Oswego, New York

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*“Life’s a dance you learn as you go.
Sometimes you lead, sometimes you follow.”*

—John Michael Montgomery, “Life’s a Dance”

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PREFACE

Why This Workbook

Shared. Governance. Use these two words separately, and there tends to be agreement regarding their meaning. Use these two words together in the context of higher education in the United States and Canada, and agreement on the meaning of this phrase is significantly less. A brief perusal of higher education trade publications will make it clear that differing interpretations of shared governance are at the root of numerous disagreements among campus stakeholder groups. The result of these disagreements often leads to votes of no confidence, abrupt resignations, endless disputes about who makes what decisions, issues—big and small—that never seem to get resolved, and a general feeling of dissatisfaction with the working relationships among campus constituencies.

We interviewed presidents/chancellors; provosts; faculty senate, staff senate, and student government leaders; and board members at higher education institutions across the spectrum—public and private institutions, four-year and two-year institutions, research and regional comprehensive universities, and HBCUs, HSIs, and PWIs—to get a sense of some of the pain points and understand the efforts to resolve both recurring and emerging issues:

- Recurring issues tend to center on transparency, authority, and process. At the root of these issues is the unexamined and unprocessed history of campus conflicts that have led to intransigence and distrust, resulting in verbal attacks, disengagement, and passive-aggressive “gotchas.”
- New or emerging issues—many caused by the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, changing demographics, and polarizing politics at the national, state, and local levels—were reported to be met with blocking and stall tactics, a refusal to engage in shared governance, verbal attacks, and leaks of confidential information via social, news media, and the good old campus grapevine.

These common responses to working with the “opposition” are not strengthening our institutions. However, it is possible and necessary to create a healthier shared governance on campuses. We recommend that a place to start is to replace these tactics with a combination of productive questioning and the challenging of long-held assumptions (discussed further in Chapter One).

But first, if shared governance is to *work*, we need a new, shared understanding of what shared governance is, and *how* it is to work. And it *can* work—if we approach it not as a duel but as a dance. We hope you enjoy the steps we lay out, as you consider a fresh approach to shared governance.

The Dance of Human Interaction

Human interactions are often referred to as a dance—a form of nonverbal communication through movement of the body. Dance involves more than *just* movement. Moving one’s body, after all, can be almost involuntary,

a result of the natural impulses and instincts of corporal existence. Examples of such instinctive movement include swatting away a fly, scratching an itch, or reaching reflexively to catch a falling object. So, what distinguishes dance from these ordinary movements? What raises it to the level of an art form? The answer is *intention*—the intentional practice of a skill that leads to the intentional expression of human moods and emotions. To perform a dance, the dancer “requires unaccustomed patterns of muscular exertion and relaxation as well as an unusually intense or sustained expenditure of energy.”¹

In the dance that takes place among constituency groups on college campuses, certain routines have become like natural impulse, nearly instinctive. That is what has occurred with the unproductive responses to recurring and emerging issues we listed on the previous page. To move out of these ruts, all parties must abandon old, unproductive patterns of relating and replace them with different ways of interacting.

The aim of this workbook is to guide campuses as they explore “unaccustomed patterns of muscular exertion and relaxation and the unusually intense or sustained expenditure of energy” needed to create healthy, productive shared governance.

With consistent, intentional practice, constituency groups can collectively build new musculature and sufficient stamina to navigate shared governance challenges with skill and grace.

Shared Governance as Tango

Drama. Passion. Drops. Kicks. Twirls. Slow movements. Quick movements. Sudden changes in direction. These words can be used to describe both the Tango and shared governance. When well executed, both the Tango and shared governance demonstrate the power of partnership and its ability to create a functional, cohesive whole from separate parties. When poorly executed, dysfunctional, arrhythmic outcomes can be the result—the consequence of failed communication and a lack of synchronized effort.

We use the analogy of the Tango throughout this workbook to illustrate the dynamic, complex nature of separate parties working together to create a cohesive, functioning whole. The breathtaking beauty of the Tango is created by each dancer executing different dance moves simultaneously. Like shared governance, the Tango consists of those who lead and those who follow. There is beauty and skill involved in both leading and following, and each dancer depends on the other. Neither role is considered better than the other. The same holds for shared governance. There are those who lead and those who follow. The role that each party plays differs, and each role requires thoughtfulness and skill to help the university thrive. Neither role is considered better than the other—leaders and followers have different functions and equal humanity.

¹ Mackrell, Judith R. "Dance." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. October 18, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/art/dance>.

How to Use This Workbook

This workbook is designed to be used by some or all constituency groups working together to strengthen shared governance at a college or university. The perfect time to use the information in this book is now, whether there has been a change in leadership (which is happening with increasing frequency), and/or an influx of new faculty and staff, or whether the same teams have been in place for a long time. The information can be used at major transition points and over time to renew constituency groups' commitment to working together for the common good.

We have designed this workbook as a practical tutorial, comprising two parts: **The Dance Steps** and **Case Studies**. You will also find an activity (writing an effective charge) in the Appendix.

Part 1: The Dance Steps

Each chapter contains what we refer to as *dance steps* to be learned. These dance steps present you with the information that each constituency group should consider regarding various aspects of shared governance as it applies to their role. As you read the dance steps, consider them an opportunity to rehearse ideas and practices. Rehearsing outside of actual shared governance processes may help to implement them during higher-stakes situations.

Each chapter will begin with a narrative contextualizing these steps; then, at the end of each section or chapter, we will provide the steps, which are specific ideas for navigating the dance of shared governance (both *intrapersonal* and introspective steps to take, and *interpersonal* steps to take), with a list for each constituency (administrators, faculty, staff, board of trustees, and students). These are the dance steps you need to learn to fulfill your role in the Tango effectively. You will note that some of these steps are unique to a specific constituency, while others apply to all.

Following the dance steps, at the end of each section or chapter, we will also include several pages of Self-Reflection questions for all readers. These are intended to help you to explore and think more deeply about the ideas in each chapter. You may wish to answer some for yourself; others might work better as a catalyst for discussion among various members of shared governance groups, either within or across constituencies.

Taken together, the seven chapters of this book provide a practical rehearsal in the essential 'dance steps' for the Tango of shared governance. This 'dance steps' tutorial consists of the following topics:

CHAPTER ONE

This chapter explores *leading* and *following* within the context of shared governance, as well as the role of assumptions in helping or hindering effective shared governance. Central to this discussion is the understanding and delineation of the roles of each party in various situations. It is necessary to have a common definition of

shared governance as a starting point, but this alone is not sufficient. Each constituent group may bring their own assumptions about the purpose and processes for shared governance, which can lead to a quagmire in which parties work at cross purposes. In this chapter, we will first offer some general observations that apply across constituent groups, and then we will examine possible assumptions that might be commonly held by each party. The first chapter concludes with a trust matrix which is designed to help increase the level of trust among and between constituency groups.

CHAPTER TWO

Sphere of influence and power dynamics are the focal points of our second chapter. We ask you to consider your roles, both formal and informal, and to examine the power you have to influence others. We also discuss the ability to influence others based on both visible and invisible identities. For any given shared governance policy and practice, your voice will be heard differently by those who share your identity than it will by those who do not. Further, your voice will be heard differently based on your intersecting identities. Lastly, we encourage you to use your sphere of influence with intentionality and to examine your approach to power/control, as well as the role that power dynamics play in the process.

CHAPTER THREE

Our third chapter delves into the structural issues related to shared governance, exploring such topics as the different types of organizational structures and ‘elected’ vs. ‘selected’ membership. The impact of administrators attending faculty and staff senate meetings as ex-officio or with voting rights is also discussed. The final topic of this chapter is consultation. What counts as consultation? When and how should formal and informal structures be used for consultation?

CHAPTER FOUR

Strategic vs. operational outcomes are the topic of this chapter. Shared governance most often calls to mind the development and review of operational policies or practices, but it also plays an important role in planning the strategic direction of an institution. Shared governance processes can also play a vital role in creating meaningful paradigm shifts in mission, vision, or values. Disagreement and resistance is expected and necessary when potential new directions for the institution are on the table. In such times, shared governance processes can be used to successfully manage opposing views while moving the campus toward new ways of being and toward strategic thinking.

CHAPTER FIVE

Central to the success of shared governance is communication, which is the focus of the fifth chapter. Chapter One initially discussed the definition of shared governance; Chapter Five returns to it, as this definition is one of the cornerstones of successful shared governance. We discuss the need for two levels of communication—*within* groups and *among* groups. We also discuss the importance of sharing data broadly to ensure transparency, because communication among constituencies is often challenged by the concept of transparency and how it is defined.

CHAPTER SIX

Shared governance also requires finding the ‘right’ tempo and timing, which is the focus of Chapter Six. The processes must allow adequate time for articulating the purpose and task at hand, gathering data (including consultation), and producing a timeline for a decision and implementation. “Adequate,” however, might have different meanings for different constituencies and about different issues. We explore the potential benefits and pitfalls of constituency groups manipulating the tempo of shared governance for perceived advantage. We also discuss the impact of semester/quarter boundaries on the tempo of shared governance.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The seventh chapter concludes the tutorial by encouraging campuses to engage in the creation of a *shared governance roles and responsibilities matrix* so that constituency groups can clarify the “who does what, when” question. We also have suggestions for campuses who may find the matrixed approach overly structured and restrictive. Lastly, we discuss the often-neglected topic of the evaluation and continuous improvement of shared governance. We recommend instituting formal evaluations, such as surveys, to be administered at regular intervals, involving all stakeholder groups. Less formal and more frequent means of assessing shared governance are recommended as self-assessments—a way for constituency groups to take responsibility for their own roles in healthy or unhealthy shared governance.

Part 2: Case Studies

Once you have completed your rehearsal, it’s time to get out on the dance floor and practice what you have learned. The **case studies** found at the end of this book will help you to hone your insight and perspective on shared governance, and will help you and your colleagues discuss strategies and ideas for improvement. The case studies follow the work lives of the faculty, staff, students, and administrators of the fictional Jackson Rockgrove University. You can explore the mission and values, org chart, and cast of characters at JRU on pages 95-98.

You may decide to engage with this workbook as an individual, in a group of peers, or in a group composed of representation across constituencies. An inter-constituency group may yield the most applied progress. In any formulation, responses to the case studies and activities can be shared between and among groups to gain insights into:

- 1) Each other’s perspectives.
- 2) What strategies and tactics are working to create productive shared governance.
- 3) What needs improvement.

As with our other workbooks, matters of diversity, equity, and inclusion are embedded throughout the book. We hope that as you use this workbook and engage with its ideas and activities, you will find ways to improve how shared governance works at your institution so that all constituencies feel that they are partners in its dance.