First among equals

Your board might be in good shape now – but recruiting and developing chairs of trustees will be a problem if early action is not taken, say **Ruth Lesirge** and **Hilary Barnard**

This article reviews the contribution of the chair of trustees and the need for succession planning of this crucial role. The mature years of many chairs and trustees undoubtedly deliver some unique experience. However, the seniority is also an indicator that early and sustained priority must be given to developing and supporting both the current and new generations of chairs. Tough financial decisions lie ahead. It is highly likely that sustainability will become the number one issue for chairs, as well as their chief executives. The continuing famine of trustees underlines the urgency to act sooner rather than later.

Focal point of effective governance

Figure 1 overleaf spotlights the potential contribution – as well as the responsibilities – that chairs will face in the near future. The tight financial circumstances require an awareness and openness to innovation and the championing of new practices[1]. They also call for commitment to lead the board to understand its responsibility in this context.

Our observations across the sector indicate that the chair is generally regarded as 'the first among equals', and is also expected by trustees and executive alike to be the most proactive member of the board. This will require them to generate and/or lead key meetings with the most influential stakeholders (whether internal or external); and represent the organisation to members, service users, funders, contractors or regulators.

The chair is usually seen as the 'line manager' and point of contact with the chief executive and thus becomes the fulcrum point for ensuring that the board delivers effective governance. Since the chair of trustees is pivotal, charities are right to be fussy about whom they select to take on this role, and why. See figure 2 for some key skills for chairs.

Effective governance is the bedrock of a charity that performs and delivers – we have rarely seen an effective board of trustees without an effective chair! It follows that the skills, knowledge and experience required of a chair make the role a demanding one, a theme espoused by training programmes and publications alike[2].

For example *Society Guardian* on a Wednesday[3] has focused on governance and the chair's role. The research by Cornforth, Harrison and Murray[4] on impact, relationships and effectiveness of chairs has also been very useful. Despite all this, there is a distinct lack of understanding (occasionally wilful) of what the role of chair of trustees actually requires. Many boards also fail to address the real demands that they will and should be making of their chair.

One can assume that most, if not all chairs, are chosen and elected because they are known to have some of the necessary attributes. Even so, with the greatest respect, the person appointed to take on this role is unlikely to be 'fully formed and perfect' for the job. Furthermore, we believe that a new chair should expect – and indeed be entitled – to ask for support, in order to become more effective.

This is not to take anything away from the great

work that is going on with the development of current and future generations of chairs. We know of several organisations that have thoroughly considered, practical arrangements for the continued learning and development of their chairs. In addition, the pilot co-mentoring programme for chairs, which the Cass CCE developed for the Governance Hub[5], demonstrated the enthusiasm of chairs for on-going peer exchange and learning. This was a short-term piece of funded action research, but several participant chairs do still meet in their peer mentoring group beyond the life of the project.

You need to look beyond the financial cost of supporting the chair to the return on investment. The board and organisation as a whole will reap the benefits of the chair's leadership role. In turn, the chair concerned gets the stimulation and satisfaction of learning and achievement. In theory this positive step should help make the role of chair more attractive and attract more suitable individuals to come forward in future rounds of recruitment.

Figure 1: Case study of Support for Skills

Support for Skills is a well respected training and development charity for senior teams in the third sector. Its work is referenced by many practitioners but trustees believe it could be more influential in terms of policy and practice.

It has a long standing chair, who is from the world of HR and training, knows Skills for Support well and has served for eight years. When she stood down, a recruitment group was formed which carried out a search and select function. The group appointed an academic high flyer from the field of education who had a number of prestigious honorary appointments, and who travelled widely for both work and pleasure. The assumption was that she would bring status and contacts to Support for Skills which would help to raise its profile and therefore its influence.

In the first year of the new chair, the organisation had significant decisions to make. Some of the key areas of its funding were at risk and its chief executive was on long-term sick leave. In the meetings she chaired, she enabled other trustees to express their views, and ensured decisions were made where needed. There were, however, a number of board meetings she was unable to attend; she was surprised when dates could not be moved to suit her diary. Her role on these occasions was taken up by the vice chair, a third sector professional. Between meetings, the vice chair updated the chair and she was also contacted by the deputy chief executive.

In email exchanges, the chair was slow to respond and needed repeated briefings since she demonstrated little grasp of the issues. In addition, she did nothing to champion Support for Skills externally, a serious disappointment to the chief executive and trustees.

The vice chair and the board secretary were increasingly concerned about the lack of leadership but reluctant to take action or be disloyal to the leader they had appointed. They 'held the fort' for twelve months but eventually agreed to talk informally to the chair, having taken soundings with the trustees. They offered to help her learn about the work, take on visits to projects and support her thinking about the future of Support for Skills. She, however, viewed the situation as perfectly acceptable, saw herself as a figurehead and declared herself unwilling and unable to change her approach to the role. The two officers felt they had to make clear that they could not support her further and would be prepared to force a vote of no confidence. She wrote to the board offering her resignation, saying that she had not expected the role to be so time consuming and regretting that she was not able to give the amount of time required.

In the fifteen months that this took, the board had become increasingly unsettled and adrift – and therefore unable to provide the governance steer that Support for Skills so badly needed.

Out of the shadows...

Our contention is that appointment to the role of chair is not a reward for work done or time served on committees or boards. And it should never be the last case scenario of someone's 'turn'. Nor is the search for high profile high status individuals a guarantor of effective leadership. In practice, it is extremely difficult to make demands on those who see their psychological contract with the organisation as being merely a figurehead.

In addition – and this is a cause for optimism – we believe that chairs of trustees are primarily nurtured, not necessarily pre-formed. Their effectiveness cannot and should not be defined in rigid terms where one size fits all. We consider the style and calibre of chairs' performance to be located in the specific circumstances – of time, location and purpose[6]. The long-term implication of this is that, whenever a new chair is to be appointed, the board should take the opportunity to review their expectations of the chair appointed accordingly and subsequently create an appropriate support programme for the new appointee.

Our challenge to boards is to demonstrate in practice their faith in the value of such investment. Central to this shift of culture is a belief that developing the chair has the potential not only to make governance more effective, but – even more significantly – contributes to the quality of delivery of their mission.

We therefore question why third sector

Figure 2: Summary of key leadership dimensions for chairs

- Facilitating a cycle of productive review with fellow trustees, including what they feel about the workings of the board. The chair needs to be the champion and to lead the board's review of effectiveness.
- Being an effective point of reference for individual trustee dissatisfaction and worries, in particular with regard to other trustees and the chief executive. Our experience is that this frustration is poorly handled by many chairs.
- Ensuring board enthusiasm for and knowledge of current projects and the work of the charity.
- Productively supporting and encouraging the work of the chief executive; being a 'critical friend'.
- Championing reflection on all aspects of governance. This is essential to get a clear idea of the value added by the board's work.
- Leading the recruitment and facilitating the induction of new trustees

trustees and boards should be so reluctant to invest the time and money in the development of their chairs. With so much attention placed on the role and effectiveness of not-for-profit chief executives and an increasingly powerful and effective group in ACEVO to speak for them, the contribution and needs of the chair of trustees is often overlooked. The throwaway line which we sometimes hear – that being chair 'only involves chairing the board meetings' – is not helpful, implying as it does that there are few (if any) skills and behaviours that effective chairs need!

All too often we have found these dimensions tacitly delegated – we would say over-delegated – to the chief executive. This considerably weakens the emphasis on leadership development at board level. Chairs of trustees must enter their role prepared to find time to develop, since being a chair is a (mainly) voluntary job, not merely a personal hobby. A clear inference of this approach is that chairs need to be part of an integrated development programme, rather than have the occasional top-up. Input to their personal development should be comparable to that for the chief executive.

Investing in boards

Many charities are reluctant to commit money to building the capacity of the board. Our argument is that making this investment is not selfish or self centred on the part of trustees but essential to good charity governance and optimising the performance of the charity for its beneficiaries. Recruitment and search agencies have sometimes struggled to get boards to invest in outsourcing the recruitment of new chairs to third parties. Even those charities which have the most elaborate arrangements for assuring quality of service do not necessarily carry out health checks on their chair's effectiveness.

It is worth noting that ensuring the continuing development of the chair is not necessarily a matter of money or training courses. A willingness to observe and learn from others will be huge assets (and free) on the journey to effective chairing.

1. See 'Why not'? in *Caritas*, issue 28, March 2010, pages 30 to 32
2. *ACEVO Your Chair and Board - a survival guide and toolkit for CEOs;* Cass CCE Tools for Success, 2009
3. Voluntary trustees, *Society Guardian*, 27 January 2010
4. *Chris Cornforth, Yvonne Harrison and Vic Murray, What Makes Chairs of Governing Bodies Effective?*, NCVO/CTN, 2010
5. *Governance Hub Mentoring for Chairs*, 2007, see www.ncvo-vol.org.uk
6. Patrick Dunne, *Running Board Meetings*, Kogan Page, 1999

Ruth Lesirge is a visiting Fellow and tutor on the Cass CCE degree programme and has a special interest in chair, chief executive, board and trustee development

Hilary Barnard heads up the strategy and change consultancy services and is a visiting fellow at Cass. He is a former charity chief executive.

www.cass.city.ac.uk/cce/index.html