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. 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.

For example Society Guardian on a Wednesday has focused on governance and the chair’s role. The research by Cornforth, Harrison and Murray 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, demonstrated the enthusiasm of chairs for ongoing 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.

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 salaried 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. 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...
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—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 pop-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 who 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.

---

**Do you know?**

**Which firm of accountants...**

- was voted ‘number one for charity expertise’ in the 2008 Charity Audit Survey?
- is auditor of more ‘top 100 charities’ than any other firm?
- has the largest team of specialists serving the charity sector?
- has the fastest growing charity audit and advisory business?

**For further information and a no obligation meeting contact:**

Pesh Framjee, Head of our Not for Profit Unit, or one of our other specialist partners: Tina Allison, Tim Baines, Sam Coutinho, Naziar Hashemi, Mike Hicks, Sally Kirby or our Chief Executive Andrew Pianca

T: 020 7842 7100
E: nonprofits@horwath.co.uk
www.horwathcw.com

---

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
5. Governance Hub Mentoring for Chairs, 2007, see www.ncvo-vol.org.uk
6. Patrick Dunne, Running Board Meetings, Kogan Page, 1999