

Governance: It's not the "what", it's the "how"

Julia Lever

Julia Lever looks at some of the sector's Governance challenges and discusses how the Centre addresses them, with Ruth Lesirge, Visiting Fellow and Head of the Governance Practice within the Centre for Charity Effectiveness. Ruth has had extensive direct experience of Governance responsibilities and practicalities as Chair and Vice Chair of both national campaigning and local service delivery charities. Additionally, she has been Chief Executive at both local and national level.

I started by asking Ruth what she felt distinguished the Centre for Charity Effectiveness' approach to helping clients in this area. Her response was clear and pragmatic. "There is an enormous amount of stuff around telling you as a Board what you should be doing; what we're interested in is how you do it. Working with clients, our focus is very much on the how and crucially, making it proportionate to the age, stage and size of the organisation".

Most if not all would agree that the cornerstone of organisational effectiveness is good governance; how could it be otherwise? The Board of Trustees are responsible for guardianship of the Trust's vision, developing and maintaining a strategy to deliver that vision, ensuring the resources are in place whether executive and/or voluntary, making sure the delivery of that strategy is effective and financially viable. Trustees also have to take and at the same time guard against risks; they are the ultimate decision makers and have joint and several liability. And in doing all this, they are unremunerated except by the satisfaction of knowing they are making a real difference; often they are enabling something which they value to continue to operate, which in all probability would not be happening if the organisation did not succeed. I am frequently amused by friends who are coming towards the end of their working lives in the commercial sector and looking forward to "getting involved" in a charity and seem to view it as a worthwhile and quite gentle "hobby" for retirement. Of course they rapidly learn that Trusteeship is not a soft option at all!

We are privileged in this country to have such an active and dynamic Third Sector and it says something positive about our society that this is so; this is a comforting thought when so many news headlines would seem to have us believe otherwise. It is an increasingly regulated and frame-worked sector. The range of guidelines, codes of practice and demands made of Boards is substantial and may sometimes feel overwhelming. Many trustees are anxious that they do not know all that they should know, and that they do not have time or expertise to do something about it. For many organisations, and not only small or new ones, this worry can lead almost to paralysis. Ruth's advice to Boards in this situation is straightforward. "Don't do nothing because it all seems too much and too difficult, it'll only get more so. Get started by choosing one or two things you can do fairly easily; keep it manageable."

I asked Ruth if clients are clear about their requirements when they ask for outside help. “Frequently not. The request is often that they’d like a session on Governance but without specifying specific areas to be improved, usually prompted by a general feeling of vulnerability. Sometimes a highly motivated and interested Chair wants to have a look at what’s happening. Sometimes an enlightened Chair and Chief Executive team seek outside help to stir things up a bit. Occasionally, asking for outside help is a tactical way of managing a difficult individual on the Board or an uncomfortable relationship which is undermining the Board’s effectiveness. In cases like this, we can help the whole Board to resolve the matter, by working with the whole team without apparently spot-lighting individuals.”

Training budgets in our sector are frequently tiny to non-existent and perhaps understandably Trustee training seems to be at the bottom of the priority list when allocations are being made. Trustees may feel that they should already be skilled for their role or that they should not have money spent on their development. However, if good governance really is the cornerstone of organisational effectiveness, both positively and negatively, why are funds prioritised first for paid staff? Perhaps the old adage.... “if it ain’t broke don’t fix it”, means that Boards don’t do enough early enough but wait for a crisis to force their hand. In the real world of the voluntary sector funds are severely limited so I talked with Ruth about how the Centre’s Governance practice copes with this. “We offer a range of possibilities, products if you like, customised for and proportionate to the particular organisation. We can participate and/or facilitate a Trustee or Trustee and Staff away day which has agreed specific objectives and measurable outcomes. We can do a programme of 3 (or more) half day sessions over a 9 to 12 month period; this is particularly effective as it gives the Board the opportunity to practice what they’ve prioritised, with ongoing support. We run open but size-limited workshops/short courses on the basic principles of good governance, where people can work through real issues with support and learning, from their peer’s experiences as well as from us. Currently we are developing tool kits or workbooks which will allow for ongoing self development and evaluation.”

How much is the governance work of the Centre for Charity Effectiveness limited to those with easy access to London? “It isn’t at all... in the last two years we’ve worked with organisations throughout the UK, in Wales, Warwickshire, Newcastle, Bournemouth, all points of the compass.”

Does size, age matter? Ruth was adamant not. “We have helped or are working with organisations of all shapes and sizes, from a local housing co-operative group just getting going to a small frontline, national charity with income of around £250,000 to a national campaigning charity with a £1m income and a nationwide service delivery welfare organisation with an income of over £25m.” The Centre has also had some success in securing funding for specified pieces of work by joint/partnership approaches to possible funders, whether corporate or grant-making, and will be doing more of this.

And for the future, Ruth described the work currently under way on co-mentoring for Chairs (work commissioned for the Governance Hub). It follows on the heels of the trustee Recruitment Guide that Centre associates were commissioned to write for the Hub.

She sees the potential for other new Centre initiatives, for example developing a road-show which can take the Centre's work further a-field, increasing the cadre of appropriately skilled and experienced colleagues to undertake more coaching and mentoring for Chairs.

If you would like to find out whether and how the Centre could help you with Governance concerns or challenges for your organisation, please email the centre.