



HIGH IMPACT, LOW COST - CHAIR AND TRUSTEE DEVELOPMENT

This article explores trustee training and development needs and is based on the proposition that boards have a duty to *lead through governance*; furthermore, the position of the chair requires special attention. It builds on a previous article ([First Among Equals](#)), arguing that the training and development of chairs should be looked at both separately and alongside those of other trustees.

The value of training and development for all trustees is based on the recognition that a leaderless board is likely to be less effective over the long term- and particularly in difficult times. This links directly to the benefit of such a leader being able to require that an investment be made (by the organisation and board members) in improving the practice of the wider group of trustees.

William Ryan characterises the work of the board as being made up of three components; he identifies these three key 'modes' as being

1. Fiduciary, where the board concentrates primarily on the stewardship of the tangible assets of their organisation (money, property, staff) and the performance and delivery of services within the mission;
2. Strategic, where the trustees work to create a strategic partnership with the paid executive, to steer the work and wellbeing of the organisation into the immediate future;
3. Generative, in which the board not only steers and guides the work of the organisation, adding to the understanding and analysis of the external environment and 'learning with the CEO' and paid executive in a creative way that enables future - think and makes new strategic thinking possible. The example he gives of this mode of working is where *"the board of a human-service organization work with their ED on a major shift – away from trying to help families by offering them counselling, and toward helping them by building stronger, healthier communities. They got there partly by looking outside the board room, and outside the "board book" – meeting with experts, reading, even visiting other organizations. The ED didn't supply information. She just brought both a looming sense that they were approaching a dead end, and a possibility that there might be something more promising in a community approach."*¹

Chairs and their Boards

One assumption under-pinning this article is that the leadership role of the chair requires a relational approach not a command-and-control model. Useful skills needed therefore include the ability to maintain contact, facilitate development, and sustain the confidence and commitment of trustees and thereby motivate them. In addition, we believe that without development, the other trustees (including the honorary officers) of most boards are - or over time become, just a set of individuals bringing disparate knowledge and skills. They are not a team by virtue of sitting together; however, that team development approaches (based on

¹ Governance as Leadership - reframing the work of nonprofit boards, Chait, Ryan & Taylor 2005



well grounded theory - for example Tuckman notion of teams ‘forming, storming norming, performing’²) - are not rocket science, but are likely to increase the productivity and effective use of trustee and meeting time. Hence also, the usefulness of attending to David Nadler’s proposition that *“the key (to corporate governance) lies in the working relationship between boards and managers, in the social dynamics of board interaction and the competence, integrity and constructive involvement of individual trustees.”*³

Finally, we think that only if chairs manage and lead boards competently, will trustees as a corporate body be able to hold the organisation’s strategic objectives sufficiently in mind and govern well. This is particularly important in the current environment when boards and organisations may need to swiftly reposition themselves to be sustainable but remain on-mission.

Trustees and their roles

We bring together some commonly held assumptions about trustees in the list below. We have heard people make reference to all of these; some occur with considerable frequency.

- Most trustees think they have the best interests of the organisation at heart;
- Many trustees believe that they are not able to give sufficient time to their work as trustee;
- Many trustees rely heavily on the advice and preparatory work of the chair and/or Chief Executive;
- Some trustees have a just-in-time approach to preparation for board and other meetings;
- Many trustees would like to visit a wider range of the organisations projects/services to learn more about work on the ground;
- Many trustees defer to what they see as the expertise of senior staff executive;
- Some trustees are frustrated by what they perceive to be inadequate recognition of their expertise (technical, experiential or professional).

Chairs and Trustees

Approaches to training and development of chairs and trustees will necessarily be shaped by your views of your board members; these may, of course, be very different to those we offer here. However, we include these as some of the attributes espoused by people we have encountered in our board/governance consultancy work.

² Bruce Tuckman - Development Sequence in Small Groups, Psychological Bulletin 63 (6), Spring 2001

³ David Nadler, Jeffrey Sonnenfeld, Cynthia Montgomery, Rhonda Kaufman – Building Better Boards, Harvard Business Review, May 2004



Assumption	Positive	Negative
Authority of the chair	Most boards recognise the authority of the chair	Some chairs are appointed on the basis of Buggin's turn
Delivering on commitments	Most trustees are prepared to do things when asked by the chair	Some trustees commit but never deliver; others avoid doing any work between board meetings
Recognition of chair contribution	Most trustees recognise the work of the chair	Nobody takes the chair seriously; s/he is never available between meetings
Personal and board development	Some trustees are really good about developing themselves and their skills rather than the board's capabilities	Generally speaking, trustees are reluctant to take on development opportunities
Application of learning	Trustees use development opportunities to good effect and apply what they have learned	Some trustees go on training but it does nothing to change the way they think or behave
Aspiration to role of chair	Most trustees are aware of whether they want to take on the role of chair	Some trustees take up the role of chair because they feel entitled to be chair, rather than because they want to do the work involved Some trustees misunderstand the nature of the role, and as chairs provide either too little oversight and questioning or far too much intervention in operational management
Chair's knowledge of the organisation	Some chairs know the organisation and keep up to date with the work it does	Some chairs don't know enough about the organisation and its beneficiaries, and don't make sufficient efforts to learn about the position of the organisation in the sector
Knowledge sharing	Some chairs report back and tell others what they have learned and suggest how the board can pursue it	The board never hears what meetings or events the chair has attended, nor what they learned or how that might be useful
Chair performance	Anyone who is chair wants to do as good a job as possible	Some chairs have no idea what they should be doing, or/and are poor at planning board meetings and events Some chairs are not very good at chairing board meetings
Leadership balance	Many chairs work hard to achieve a balance of leadership between chair and Chief Executive	Some chairs fail to maintain contact with fellow trustees and/or CEOs between meetings
Working with colleagues	Many chairs give time freely and generously to their roles	Some chairs fail to maintain an effective working relationship with the Chief Executive



Question: Which of these apply to you and your fellow trustees?

We suggest you might try these out with your board (maybe anonymously) and find out whether you have a common view about positive and negative aspects of your board using the above checklist! This can support you in forming a plan that can help your board to decide where to focus its development energies.

The value and limitations of a Skills Audit

Skills audits have become something of a hook upon which many boards hang all their hopes for improving the performance. This is too much to load onto one tool for analysing the skills and expertise a trustee body might need. It also has too little to say about the behaviours by board members that will best suit the needs of your organisation. NCVO's Tools for Tomorrow⁴ includes a panoply of tools which can be equally applicable for board as for managerial use.

Nevertheless, a skills audit can be a useful vehicle for helping trustees to reflect on their complement of skills and knowledge, and potentially key areas where they can contribute. The most common application of skills audits is in planning the recruitment of new or replacement trustees. They can also help in understanding the development needs of some trustees. Examples of trustee skills audits abound and can be found on the net.⁵

Cost-free or low cost development options

The most common word used in discussing the question of how best to improve board performance is "training". This can often be unhelpful, as the training envisaged is too often focused on acquiring blocks of knowledge; we propose that in relation to boards and trustees the emphasis needs to be much more on developing new or enhanced *skills and behaviours*.

Instead of short courses away from board meetings, the approach we suggest emphasises learning on the job of being a trustee. Used effectively, the developmental approach will energise the skills commonly identified in a skills audit; in addition it can change the focus of the intervention from imparting knowledge (with its sense of duty) to enabling board effectiveness, thereby increasing confidence, job satisfaction and benefitting the end users.

Despite all the encouragement by the Charity Commission and others, there is evidence that many third sector organisations are reluctant to invest money in developing chairs and trustees. It is also true that many chairs are reluctant to spend the organisation's money on their own development. Practical approaches are needed to break this log jam.

⁴ <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/products-services/publications/tools-for-tomorrow>

⁵ www.icsa.org.uk/assets/files/pdfs/guidance/080310.pdf; www.governancepages.org.uk; www.reachskills.org.uk/skill-audit-2; www.voscur.org/system/files/skills+audit



It is useful to focus on some low cost development options. These include:

- **Co-mentoring**; see case studies of chairs who participated in the pilot project funded by the Governance Hub⁶ delivered by Cass Centre for Charity Effectiveness;
- **Action learning sets** (for trustees of one or for a mix of several boards). These can be initially externally facilitated, but then self managed;
- **Attending key conferences** such as the ACEVO Winter Conference for CEOs, chairs and trustees and the NCVO/BWB Trustee conference.

It is interesting to note that there is substantial anecdotal evidence from trustees that peer networking (by both chairs and trustees) is very productive irrespective of the size of the organisation; representatives of both large and small organisations can learn from the engagement.⁷ Three areas where peer networking and exchange could be particularly valuable are difficulties in dealing with staff who are under-performing; getting staff to work across specialisms and break down silos; and managing staff at a distance.

We see encouraging signs that at least some chairs and boards are showing more commitment to their development through sessions in board time. For example, through inviting external contributors to brief them on specialist areas; holding board meetings on a project site with a tour or briefing as part of the meeting; and systematically scheduling slots at board meetings for workshop sessions (led by senior staff) about key areas of organisational delivery.

Given the continuing need to be economic with regard to trustee development costs we have explored some skills and behaviours that the board needs and how these can be improved without great cost. The template we use is offered below; the content is a starting point open to you to modify and make relevant to your organisation.

Development need	Activity	Cost
1. Behaviour and participation at board meetings	<p>ACTIVITY: Trustees to contribute at the end of each meeting a note saying what was the most useful and least useful part of the meeting and what they have learned.</p> <p>OUTCOME ACTION: chair summarises the observations at the next meeting, suggesting what might be done differently to improve board practice.</p>	<p>10 minutes time.</p> <p>No ££££ cost</p>
2. Being effective as member of board Task & Finish Groups: understanding active participation	<p>ACTIVITY: Chair leads board discussion about preparation and participation- behaviour expected of Group members.</p> <p>OUTCOME ACTION: List of top 5 requirements is set out as part of Terms of reference for all Committees</p>	<p>CEO/chair's preparation time</p> <p>board time</p> <p>No ££££ cost</p>

⁶ <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/search/node/Michael%20Noonan>

⁷ ACEVO Investing in leaders programme 2010



Development need	Activity	Cost
3. Formal delegations: an annual review of delegations to Sub Committees and Chief Executive	ACTIVITY: Chair/CEO or Governance Committee review existing documents on delegations; compares to practice in last 12 months OUTCOME ACTIONS: Report with recommendations discussed by board; formal delegation framework discussed by trustees	CEO/chair preparation time No ££££ cost
4. Role of board in strategic planning	ACTIVITY: CE/SMT prepare draft paper reviewing strategic period just finishing; Trustees discuss and establish strategic direction; CE/SMT/trustees hold event to produce core content for strategic plan; CE/SMT draft outline plan for consultation with board, staff, other stakeholders OUTCOME ACTION: Draft plan prepared by CE/SMT; presented for board discussion and decision	Paid staff time Board meeting time £££ cost of event for trustee/staff group Staff & trustee time in drafting and consulting; Board meeting time
5. Individual Trustee reviews	ACTIVITY: Develop an agreed framework; trustee completes self evaluation form; Chair/Vice chair complete assessment form for each trustee; Chair and Vice chair hold trustee review meetings OUTCOME ACTION: Chair/Vice chair report general themes of strengths & gaps to board; discuss re. board annual development programme	Chair/Vice chair practice using framework – maybe £££ for coaching support Voluntary time committed by Officers for prep. And interviews – no ££cost board time; £££ for board development programme
6. Appraisal of Chief Executive:	ACTIVITY: Framework for appraisal/review developed by CEO/chair and Vice chair; all parties complete framework form in preparation for review meeting. OUTCOME ACTIONS: 3 parties hold review meeting to reflect on CEO performance and plan objectives etc for the next year. Key summary of outcomes reported to board by chair or Vice chair	Chair/Vice chair time CEO paid time Time used on meeting; some travel expenses for chair etc
7. Trustee induction development required in order to optimise contribution	ACTIVITY: Trustee group or governance sub-committee works with CEO/SMT to draft content and process of trustee induction; sub-committee consults board on content and secures trustee involvement	Time for meeting(s) Reading/editing time Time for item at board meeting
8. The user voice	ACTIVITY: Trustee/SMT working group develop document about why and how to ensure user voice in governance; board consulted and agree final version OUTCOME ACTION: Staff mandated to facilitate user engagement based on process agreed by board	Working group meetings Board meeting time Staff (paid) development time
9. Conflict of interest policy	ACTIVITY: Board seeks general and if needed, specialist knowledge and advice – maybe a presentation from expert	CE time preparing general briefing. Specialist attends and presents to trustees – may require £££. Paper with recommendations discussed and agreed

About the authors



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