

5 things I could do to immediately improve the effectiveness of my Board

Eastside Primetimers has been providing advice on effective governance to charities, social enterprises and other non-profit organisations for over 10 years. We have been recruiting Chairs, Treasurers, Non-executive Directors and Trustees for Boards of all shapes and sizes. Our talent pool of over 100 individuals has first-hand experience of private, public and social sector Boards. We pride ourselves on our cross-sector experience. These tips on Board effectiveness are based on experience not theories. If you would like to know more then please contact Bernice Rook, Bernice@ep-uk.org or call 020 7250 8335.

1. Carry out a skills audit as a means of identifying which one or two of the longer term Board members may need to be changed

Does your Board have a policy on how long its members can stay? Even if it does, are you getting the right contribution from your Board to the issues you and your team are facing? Changing the composition of the Board can become quite personal which is why having an objective method, such as a skills and experience audit can help.

2. Provide every Board member with a subscription to the best sector magazine or website to help them understand the factors that are driving change in your sector

Diversity of skills, background and experience is a key ingredient in many of the highest performing Boards but this may also lead to a situation where very few of your Board members actually work in the sector in which you are operating. This can create a knowledge gap that, at its worst, can hold back the change that your organisation really needs. Of course all Board members get papers from you that describe what you are planning to do but few of them may truly understand the context within which you are operating. Even fewer may understand the economic and political drivers of change. Finding easy ways for Board members to keep up to date with these issues is something that you can facilitate.

3. Create sub-committees to focus on key strategic issues - service quality, people development, diversification - so that they are more engaged with the strategic future of your organisation

Many Boards have sub-committees that deal with classical governance issues, such as an audit or finance committee, but few create more fluid sub-committees to deal with strategic issues such as diversification or developing management talent. And yet these are often areas where your Board members have something to contribute because they are dealing with topics that are not sector specific.

4. Ask your Chair to have a review conversation with each of the members of the Board that identifies what they would change to make Board meetings more rewarding

How many times have you left a Board meeting feeling that the discussion didn't quite go the way you wanted because some individuals went off-piste? Managing the dynamics of Boards is a fine art. Your Chair may occasionally need some help to freshen up the way in which individual members interact. Simply talking with them, one to one, can often throw up simple solutions and also add to their engagement.

5. Bring in one or two external speakers to your Away Days who will stimulate thinking and enliven relationships

Away Days can become a bit of a ritual. Generally you have to put in all the effort. But have you ever experimented by bringing in external speakers? Board members need to be stimulated; they need to be taken out of their comfort zones just as much as you and your team do. You probably know individuals who would gladly come along and add an element of provocation and challenge and who wouldn't be costly.