

5 things I could do to increase my effectiveness as a Board member

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. Find a good way of understanding the market and environment in which your organisation is operating

Many non-profit Board members are attracted to their organisations because of the work they do and because it is in a new sector for them. As a Board member you are responsible for the strategy of the organisation so what information do you need in order to ensure that you understand the external issues confronting your organisation? Sector/trade magazines and websites are one useful source but the consultancies that work in your sector can also be useful sources of information.

2. Reflect on when to provide support and when to provide challenge to the management team

Being part of a Board may be a new experience for you. Understanding the dynamics of your Board is important. One feature which is unique to the majority of non-profit Boards is that none of the management team, including the Chief Executive, are Board members but they attend and support the Boards. How to get the most out of this relationship is something worth pondering on. When to challenge them and when to support? What sort of relationship do you try and build outside of the Board meeting? These are important questions for you to consider.

3. Join the sub-committees that really get to the heart of the business

How you use the time you are committing to your Board member responsibilities is important to plan and consider. You will be expected to attend the formal Board meetings but you may also be asked to be part of the sub-committees that focus on specific issues such as audit or quality. You may also be asked if you are able to provide support to specific parts of the organisation depending on your skills and expertise, such as to HR, or marketing or IT. Use your time judiciously. Mix and match what you do as this will expose you to different people and parts of the organisation.

4. Learn to read between the lines so that you get a realistic picture of what is actually going on inside the organisation

Good Board members are able to interpret what they are told and what they experience. They don't take everything at face value. They reflect on the context and the personalities involved. Talk to your Board colleagues about what you are seeing and hearing. Check your understanding with others, especially the Chair.

5. Experiment with different ways of working most effectively with your colleagues especially the Chair and Treasurer

Board meetings generally follow a prescribed formula and are a key part of good governance. Getting the most out of the Board meetings is therefore important for everyone who attends. Boards do run the risk of getting stuck in a bit of a rut because they are so formulaic. Ask yourself how the quality of the discussion and decision making can be improved. You have as much of a responsibility for this as the Chair or Deputy. Seek ways of freshening up the dialogue. This might include taking some discussions outside of the formality of the Board. Be creative. Be thoughtful. Be proactive.