

A board's response to the coronavirus crisis



Recent experiences of the Chair of a charity

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus, we have seen different boards react in different ways, all focusing on their key roles of leadership and oversight. In this short series of interviews, I discuss their practical experience with a few board members. Today's anonymised note summarises my discussion with the Chair of a social care charity.

Hanif: Thank you for making time to share your recent experiences from your board's perspective. Can I start by asking you about priorities at these challenging times?

Chair: Of course. Without question the main focus has been on the wellbeing and safety of our staff and those we care for. This has always been a priority for us but, with the heightened risk and uncertainties, this has been a particularly important area of focus.

We have also had to keep a close eye on our financial situation, but we have been working on this for the last two or three years and we are in good financial health.

There has been considerable pressure on the management team so, as trustees, we have been conscious of the need to give them space to focus on responding to the challenges and issues, which can change from day to day, whilst providing them with the support they need.

Hanif: What impact has there been on your recent board meetings?

Chair: We had an important board meeting planned for late March, the time we usually review and approve our annual budget. A number of our trustees indicated that they preferred to avoid traveling into London although the lockdown had not yet been announced. So, we decided to set up a video call option to enable them to join the meeting. That planning proved to be well-timed as, in the event, all of our trustees and the management team participated by video call.

Though it was the first time we used this technology (BlueJeans), it was very effective. We did not make any major changes to the agenda, and had two guests join us to provide with both a staff and external perspective. It was, of course, important, that trustees had an up-to-date

picture of how Covid-19 was affecting our charity's work and the work that management and staff were putting in to ensure our beneficiaries remained safe and well looked after. This was top of the agenda.

Using technology more effectively will give us more options for our board and committee meetings in future, now that we have seen how well it worked.

Hanif: Did you change your style of chairing for your first 'virtual' meeting?

Chair: There were some challenges with sixteen people participating. Advanced planning definitely helped. The key differences were:

- making sure we had good papers – recognising the severe workload on the management team, encouraging short reports which adequately briefed trustees and provided the basis for good discussion
- speaking to trustees before the board meeting where I thought they had something specific to contribute, rather than leave this until the meeting itself; this led to more effective contributions at the meeting
- ensuring presentations by management were particularly concise, focusing on key points rather than repeating the papers, in order to set the scene for discussion; this did not always happen at our regular meetings
- going round each of the trustees – and, when appropriate, members of the management team too – to make sure everyone's voice was heard, particularly on major decisions; of course, body language was much more difficult to observe
- trying to keep the meeting focused so that concentration levels didn't drop – trustees were asked not to say something simply for the sake of it, but only if they had something in particular to add to the discussion.

Additionally, I have made a point of speaking to all the trustees since the board meeting to get their feedback and to ensure they all felt they had contributed where they wanted to.

Hanif: What role have your trustees played and how have they been kept informed?

Chair: I have been the main conduit to the trustees, updating them regularly on calls or by email. I have fed back to the Chief Executive where important questions or suggestions have come up, to enable the management team to stay focused on those we look after and our staff. Where particular trustees have relevant expertise, we have drawn on them as the need has arisen.

Hanif: You explained how important it was to give space to the management team. How have they dealt with the challenges?

Chair: We are part way through our ambitious five-year strategy that we set in 2018. Our planned growth focused on a combination of our residential services and, mainly, developing our outreach work. Working in partnership with other specialist organisations is also an important part of our future direction. In this environment, we have had to adapt substantially our outreach work, using more phone and text, even though we expect it to resume as soon as possible.

Our residential services are therefore the main focus, with some of our residents being particularly vulnerable. As some of our staff have had to self-isolate, this has created staff shortages. However, the management team and our staff have responded admirably to work with great flexibility. For example, head office staff with experience of working in homes and who have DBS certificates have volunteered to provide cover at our residential services. Other head office staff have transitioned to home working very effectively. Thankfully, over the past few weeks, we have seen the number of staff self-isolating decline.

Early on, before the lockdown began, the management team was split into two groups – they kept physically apart as we saw the risk of the whole management team becoming ill

having far too serious a consequence. Nonetheless, though physically separated, the two groups have maintained effective coordination and engagement throughout. Of course, now they are now all homeworking.

Hanif: Financial risk and viability is now a major challenge for many charities. You've said that your financial position is strong – but what further key actions is your board expecting?

Chair: We have benefited from de-risking our balance sheet in recent years and the focus now is on cash management. Income is not the biggest concern as it is fairly certain but, needless to say, cash collection is big priority. Expenditure has been a focus and cost savings are being made on non-essential costs. There will be some easy savings in areas like travel costs but recruitment of agency workers to fill vacancies to keep essential services operating is a possible concern. We have been reviewing contracts with suppliers to ensure there are no hidden surprises, but also working with suppliers to ensure continuity of essential services and supplies. Cash flow and operational performance KPIs are closely watched and trustees are updated regularly.

Hanif: What has been the key focus of your communications at this difficult time?

Chair: As Chair, I speak to our Chief Executive weekly for an update now. We had more frequent conversations last month but, as mentioned, it is important to give the management team space to run the organisation. I'm always available and we speak when the need arises.

Of course, the management team have been keeping staff updated and, though many are working remotely, supervision continues to be effective in this virtual workplace and spirits remain high. I have also recently written to all staff to express the trustees' thanks for their hard work, loyalty and dedication at this very difficult and challenging time.

Hanif: Thank you for your time – that's been a very interesting and informative discussion.

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