

Trustee Exchange: Thursday 11 April 2019

Building the Ultimate Top Team: Reaching New Heights Together

The hypothesis underpinning this session

The top team (combined board and executive) relationship underpins governance effectiveness and is critical to organisation success.

The session involved over 100 participants exploring key concepts about top team effectiveness in small groups using two questions:

1. Define the characteristics of effective 'top teams'
2. Explore the greatest dilemmas facing top teams and gather ideas about how we tackle them.

The characteristics of an effective 'top team'



There were striking themes emerging from the analysis:

Analysis of the discussions produced further insights about effective top teams:

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| <p>Characteristics:</p> | <p>Trust Diversity Honesty Openness Transparent Respect Mutual respect Integrity Action orientated (not endless discussion; decisions based on available info, judgement, trust) Flexibility Change opinions where necessary Commitment Challenge each other Active listeners Courageous Motivated, committed, enjoying Each knows the strengths and weaknesses of the other; and when to call on either Strength of character and humility (each with the other) Positivity in adverse conditions</p> |
| <p>What a strong top team will be able to do (together):</p> | <p>Inspire the organisation Deliver on mission Create an effective organisation</p> <p>Be ready to challenge and be challenged Practice constructive challenge – challenge the idea not the person Challenge and accept challenge Handle conflict well Able to question where we don't understand each other's remit Confidence to disagree/co-operate Not be frightened to challenge the norm</p> <p>Value different skills and backgrounds Leave egos at the door Make decisions which are acted upon Build on each other's inputs Listen to understand</p> |
| <p>What a strong top team will have:</p> | <p>Clarity of purpose Shared vision Vision and personal goals aligned Shared values</p> <p>Close working relationship Clear boundaries</p> <p>Diversity of mind-set Diversity of skill sets Diversity of backgrounds</p> |

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| | <p>Avoidance of groupthink Common interests as well as things that are not shared Be intellectually curious</p> <p>Effective, skilled chair Chair as moderator, with impartiality Respected chair Good leadership Good chair – open approachable, engaged trustees Non dominating chair who can summarise discussion</p> <p>Broad skill sets, relevant to task Skill base adequate for the task and environment Know limits of knowledge Emotional intelligence (know when to shut up) Commitment (attend, read, challenge)</p> <p>Know it's OK to feel uncomfortable</p> |
| <p>Key ways to ensure a stronger top team:</p> | <p>Clear strategy for board and exec to work to Able to measure performance, progress to goals</p> <p>Understand boundaries between board and exec; work on this together Have specific, clear measures of success Define clear roles and responsibilities Understand each other's roles Code of conduct (common understanding of role and difference between strategic and operational)</p> <p>Use of professionals to support the governance function Feedback on performance Provide clarity and reassurance</p> <p>Good communication Listening Balance between listening and talking Feedback, each way Regular dialogue and communication outside of trustee meetings Willingness to see each other's point of view Constructive questioning by trustees Challenge - work together on how to frame the challenge – not personal; challenge the idea not the person Willingness to challenge beyond the comfortable Willingness to be challenged – without feeling threatened Confidence in being heard Presence – pay attention, active listening Share the right things (don't share the non-essential) Avoid comfort - work at the edge but not beyond our zone of comfort Work hard to build relationships</p> <p>Have critical friends</p> |

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| | <p>The relationship between Chair and CEO is a crucial underpinning of all of this</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build in time to reflect together Design space for creativity into meeting time Work together to understand shared risk appetite Have effective succession planning Work to ensure no executive overload Processes to deal with disagreements Limit on tenure of trustees and chair Subject matter expertise (recognise when this needed, missing, ability to access it) |
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Balancing power dynamics – avoiding the dilemmas



Balancing the power dynamics: three dilemmas



Polarised positions are not sustainable; negotiate a balance
 Recalibrate as you evolve and the context changes



Reid and Turbide in Cornforth and Brown 2014

¹Participants' ideas about how to tackle the dilemmas can be found overleaf.

¹ Cornforth, C and Brown, W.A Editors (2014) 'Nonprofit Governance: innovative perspectives and approaches'. Routledge

How to tackle the dilemmas

Analysis of participants' ideas has been grouped into similar themes:

Building on the previous session, participants were clear that top team behaviour is critical to success and must be discussed and reviewed:

- Mutual respect between chair and chief exec is again seen as crucial, whilst recognising their differences and tensions
- Understand and identify where the current board/exec dynamics lie with a strategy to achieve
- Need to be reflective and not reliant on powerful characters
- Trustees spending time outside of meetings with the team, using their talents productively
- Trust – smaller groups to address issues – need trust to get in with things
- Diversity plays a role again
- Build relationship with staff
- Build trust and transparency
- Listen to each other without judgement
- Listen, talk to each other, watch body language
- Perspectives – canvassing views across the board; triangulation
- Acknowledging areas for improvement – builds trust
- Different types of interaction to support looking forwards and out. Away days are very important
- Create an environment where challenge is positive
- Ensure the top team is working on the mission not for the organisation (man on the moon)

It is also vital to ensure that the basic governance systems are in place:

- Clear structure and good delegation
- Regular re-evaluation: board review
- Get external perspectives on how you work
- Evaluate each board meeting
- Have an annual review with Chair
- Invest in the relationship between the Chair and CE
- Have clear role definitions – Board, committees, CE, scheme of delegation
- Whole board and exec in meetings
- Training and supporting trustees as you do staff team
- Trustees to attend staff meetings to demonstrate their interest and build their knowledge

Information and reporting are critical to ensuring a sound relationship:

- Agree what you need to know
- Be clear on management information needed
- Have clear reporting, using evidence
- Table appropriate information
- Have a clear strategy for the board and exec to work to
- Ensure accurate reporting/data available – both sides clear about what this looks like
- Information that effectively links strategy to detail
- Link mission and financial reports
- Agree how to measure success or otherwise via KPIs

- Agree ground-rules for what is/isn't reported to the board

Spend time designing the annual calendar and individual meeting agendas – this will help get the right rhythm to the year:

- Give time and space – balance on the agenda between past and future/internal and external focus, ensure there is proper planning for the year
- Concentrate on the future not just looking back
- Define the rationale for meetings – allowing a discussion and hearing everyone
- Create time and space for different agendas – to create the vision and have creative space as well as deal with the business
- Hold joint away days to engender trust and develop a shared vision and mission
- Have external speakers to explain how others see the Charity
- Build external perspectives to frame later discussion