



Developing modern boards

by Mark Butler

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BLOG

GGI executive director Mark Butler argues that board development is the bedrock of good governance.

Good governance is grounded in a commitment from those at the top to the fundamental value of organisational development.

Often, GGI first engage with clients when asked to develop the board of an organisation to improve the effectiveness of their core governance.

Good governance is both about culture and compliance. However, the success of modern organisations is achieved more through organisational dynamics and culture than effective compliance systems or a focus on the mechanics of how formal business is run. Nonetheless, one cannot succeed without the other.

Board development can and should set the tone for leadership, organisational development and culture reaching deep into the organisation. It is the bedrock of good governance.

Live board development

Good board development feels current, relevant and challenging. To add real value it must explore difficult questions: how do we want to work together (and are we doing that well)? How are we addressing the issues that keep us awake at night? How are we making sure the right values are really being lived (and are we measuring their impact)? And who do we need to learn from (and how can we innovate and change as a result)?

The way board members work together on these issues, away from the formal cycle of business, is a reliable marker of governance in any organisation or system, whatever its size. The very best boards see development as being just as important as getting the organisation of formal business spot on – and they give it just as much careful thought and planning.

Yet it is surprising how many boards still do not adopt the kind of systematic development that is proven to work. Importantly, this type of programme takes place over a year to 18 months as a continuous, creative and cumulative process, made up of multiple elements.

Hallmarks

A good board development programme combines traditional events such as away-days and structured workshops on critical-path themes, with much more personalised coaching and support. A creative programme will promote better joint working between board colleagues on projects and ideas that feed into the workshops.

Live issues and perspectives are central to development being seen as relevant and of high value. But so are the use of proven assessment tools, high-quality briefing materials, work on narratives and contributions, expert modules and skills development.

Whole-board coaching

This is what GGI calls whole-board coaching. It is not a luxury indulgence or something that should be done sporadically. A varied and structured

programme of challenge, support and learning devotes essential time and space to deeper engagement with what will give governance the bite it needs – now more than ever.

A well thought-through development programme will make the roles of non-executives more rewarding, increase the collective understanding and impact of all board members, and resolve the tensions about contribution and perspective that surface so often in governance reviews.

Design and curation

Maximum value comes with proper design and curation on behalf of the board. It is surprising how many boards do not deploy the organisational development skills available to them in their own organisation, and underestimate the value of an external partner bringing a strong peer perspective, and access to ideas and resources on governance, policy and more. Of course, a combination of the two is the ideal.

An effective development programme will include inputs on issues from key people inside the organisation, and also draw in other perspectives and experiences the board would not usually engage with – from stakeholders and partners, but also peers, thinkers and doers who can offer stimulation and challenge.

Culture and voice

Grounding the programme in sound intelligence about culture and voice needs especially careful thought. Regular stories and sharing of experience in the formal setting of the board has become a part of public sector life and has its value. As do surveys and intelligence gathered from different sources on staff, public, partner and stakeholder perspectives.

But board development should focus on more challenging questions: what impact does this really have? Do we really learn? How are differences in perspective distilled and weighted to provide real intelligence that is acted on by the board? How well does all this feed into formal governance?

New generation board development

GGI is currently working with many systems and organisations to cultivate a new generation of board development that includes exploring what is uniquely possible through collaborative models, creating meaningful collective intent and achieving impact through influence.

Whole-board coaching and clear programmes that are co-produced to have maximum impact remain central to our approach and fit well with the changed times. Everything we do is supported by tools and resources as well as our own commitment to continuous learning.

Impact

Board development can make the difference between being OK and being excellent – and increasingly between success and failure, as expectations and challenges grow more challenging.

Where public outcomes and resources are involved, and organisations become bigger and more complex, board development is a trusted and effective way of making sure the mindset at the top is set right and sound organisational development and good governance flow from it.

This requires commitment and an understanding by board members that much of good governance is in fact organisational development. That is what GGI embodies. That's why we will continue to provide board development and whole-board coaching with those who appreciate the need for it. It's also why we will continue to promote it to those who don't, yet.

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