



Alexa, start Name the Crayon Game

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A meeting of innocence and experience

Over the past week the tragicomic video of a Handforth Parish Council meeting has gone viral. Amid the hilarity, there are some real lessons for boards in the video about the importance of effective governance of meetings, etiquette and scrutiny. Less obviously, it also offers lessons about striving for age diversity.

Just like NHS board meetings, parish meetings are open to anyone who wishes to attend and they are a matter of public record. Now that they have all moved online, never have these meetings been easier to attend nor had the potential for larger audiences and engagement.

Etiquette and effective governance are vital. Handforth offers a sobering reminder to all boards of the dangers of going viral, with all the associated possible reputational damage.

With plenty of public attention now focused on searching out new Handforths, this may be a good time to revisit GGI's guide on board etiquette.

Age diversity

One noteworthy element of the Handworth video, considering how childish the behaviour it contains, is the lack of younger representatives. When boards aim for diversity, most tend to focus on gender and ethnicity. Many could benefit from thinking more about age too. Boards without younger voices might be missing valuable opportunities.

In 2018, PwC reported that across S&P 500 boardrooms, the majority of members were 75 or older and very few directors were 50 or younger. And in the NHS, despite more than half of the workforce being aged 44 or under, 65% of executive directors are 50 or over, as are more than 90% of non-executive directors.

These figures shouldn't come as a major surprise; the dominance of the 'pale, stale and male' demographic is apparent to anyone who works with boards. (BoardEx (as of February 2, 2018), with PwC analysis.)

Experience in the boardroom is essential, but the potential value added by millennials should not be underestimated.



Millennial strengths

Millennials grew up with the digital world, adapting from accessing information from books to having experience with all of the digital innovations to date. This generation are able to work flexibly in both dimensions. They represent a powerful consumer group with strong convictions and are closer to emerging as well as tested trends. And having someone on the board who is close to the organisation's end user must be helpful in keeping up-to-date with behavioural changes and expectations.

At the heart of the new generation's expectations lie the environmental and sustainability issues that are – or certainly should be – a major aspect of all organisations' strategic discussions. Younger generations care deeply about living in a more sustainable way and expect organisations to adopt measures that will limit their environmental impact.

Younger members are likely to ask different questions, which is a good way to ensure solid assurance levels and to hold all members to account.

When it comes to the pandemic, younger members will bring a fresh, more informed perspective to discussions on issues such as childcare challenges or school and college closures.

Diversity also offers learning opportunities for all generations. Younger directors have the opportunity to get advice and insights from their older colleagues and enhance their teamwork, cooperation, leadership and interpersonal skills, as well as develop their network. They might be exposed to new approaches, improve their problem-solving and even gain a better understanding of the business world in general. Diversity of thought brings a balance of perspectives around the table which is crucial when making important decisions for the organisation, its people and its beneficiaries.

Questions for boards

In our Trusting millennials bulletin last year, we argued that NHS boards should reflect on the following:

- What does the future look like for our board and what measures are we taking to attract younger board members?
- Is now the time to consider establishing a shadow board comprising only millennials, which would meet at the same time as the regular board and discuss the same issues?
- How do we ensure that we balance the invaluable, hard-earned experience of older board members with the tech-savvy, front-line expertise of younger colleagues?
- How do we assure ourselves that we engage with the communities we serve in a way that genuinely connects with the values and priorities of younger generations?
- What positive action are we taking to improve the quality of our pipeline and are we ready to walk the walk on diversity and inclusion by harnessing the experiences of millennials?

If you are not currently in a position to recruit more people, adding an empty chair around the table to symbolise 'the future generation' can be an effective temporary approach.

The search for the next viral sensation is underway and all organisational meetings are under increased scrutiny. Perhaps we could all capitalise on this new interest in boardroom meetings by recruiting fresh perspectives into our organisations.

The fact is most millennials want to have a positive impact on the world, sitting on a board could be a powerful start. Good governance does not age discriminate so why should your board?

illuminations



Illuminations

- Age diversity makes for more effective boards.
- Younger trustees will ensure your board challenges the status quo by asking different questions.
- Age diversity offers intergenerational learning opportunities and helps board members bond further.

If you have any questions or comments about this briefing, please call us on 07732 681120 or email advice@good-governance.org.uk