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Young people in governance: how boards can improve age diversity

Diverse boards are better boards. But how do you encourage more young people to get involved? The first step is to question your own attitudes and practices.

The advantages of including young people in a diverse board are clear. Diverse boards better reflect the communities they serve, they benefit from a wider variety of life experiences, they encourage accountability, and they offer a healthy challenge to the status quo.

Integrating young people into governance structures is clearly beneficial and it's increasingly popular but it still hasn't been widely adopted. With the arts standing out as an honourable exception, many organisations across all sectors – including the NHS – have yet to embrace the opportunities youth governance can bring.

One of our COVID-100 bulletins last year explored the topic of trusting millennials. Earlier this year we revisited the topic. Now we want to go a step further and explore some of the practicalities of improving age diversity, including a look at the structural adjustments that might be needed to allow young people to take their place at the board table.

First, change your attitude

Just like any marginalised group, the last thing young people want is to be onboarded as a tick-box exercise, with their voices not taken seriously or their value underappreciated.

Before even thinking about recruitment or structural change, boards must consider the hardest part of the process: challenging their own attitudes and practices.

There are a few ways to lay the groundwork for young people being incorporated into an organisation's governance framework:

1. Set aside time during normal board meetings to properly discuss the proposal. It's important that board members air their concerns or they might feel side-lined.



2. Encourage board members to engage with other organisations who have established youth governance into their frameworks to see the difference this can make. This gives members time to reflect on where young people could add the most value to their own organisation.
3. Get your board thinking about any areas of activity that require improvement. Younger board members will more naturally challenge the existing narrative, embrace change and provide fresh ideas.

Adjusting the structure

Once you are ready to welcome young people onto your board, you'll need to think about what structural changes might be necessary. There are several options.

One quite common structural adjustment is to introduce a shadow board – or 'youth board'. The shadow board would be given the same reports and have the same verbal presentations as the main board. Both would have the usual discussions and then decide on actions, the idea being that the different age perspectives would result in different approaches and the leadership would plot a way forward for the organisation that adopted the best ideas from each board.

This shadow board approach works particularly well in situations where the board believes it is falling short in some of its responsibilities.

As an example, let's assume both boards receive a report indicating that the organisation is not engaging well enough with young people in the community as the uptake of COVID-19 vaccinations remains low in that demographic.

The main board might suggest a social media campaign, which certainly has promise. But shadow board members belong to the target group and thus have a unique insight. They might go a step further and suggest going into schools, universities and community groups to ask their peers why they are hesitant – as well as engaging on social media.

Being inclusive

If a shadow board feels like a step too far for your organisation, inviting young people to the main boardroom and allowing agenda time for them to speak is a good alternative.

Bear in mind that young people might need encouragement to walk into a room full of senior colleagues who have been in their positions for years. Introducing a standing agenda item that gives young people an opportunity to comment on the board's business could be the stepping-stone they need to truly show their value and start challenging the status quo.

A step further would be to invite at least one young person into each of your sub-committees so that their youthful perspective filters down to all levels of the organisation.

With boards now thinking about the structural changes that might be needed to function in a post-COVID world, there is no better time to talk about these ideas and consider doing things a little differently. The pay-off will be worth it.



Championing age diversity and inclusion

The Good Governance Institute has long been committed to supporting age diversity and inclusion in governance. A number of years ago we were commissioned by Hertfordshire County Council to conduct a pathway review of their child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), to grapple with the complex challenges that they faced.

Mental health issues vary in severity and often worsen when not diagnosed and provided adequate treatment. Frequently the most dangerous aspect is the patient's apprehension of voicing and seeking help for their condition that can then prove to be equally as harmful. It is work like this that has shown us and continues to show us that services are better when children and young people are involved in the design and delivery of services; and when they feel respected and valued.

Having a board that includes the voices of young people within its governance structure, is having a board that is more representative and understanding of that important part of the community it serves.

Illuminations

- Introducing young people into organisations' governance structures is becoming more common but it could and should be embraced more widely across the public sector, including the NHS.
- Winning over board members must be done in the right way to maximise the benefits of improving age diversity.
- There is no right or wrong way to do this – boards should decide on the right approach for their specific needs.

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