

GOOD PRACTICE AT MEETINGS

INCLUDING MEETING LOGISTICS, AGENDA SETTING, EFFECTIVE CHAIRING

CONTEXT

The need for effective boards has never been greater in the NHS as providers attempt to deliver improvements in quality, financial sustainability and compliance with national targets as well as responding to the longer term agenda that will undoubtedly see a blurring of organisational boundaries, greater integrated working and new and evolving organisational and partnership forms. Delivering this agenda will not only require additional skills but also greater focus and the glue that will bind all of this together is the constant need for effective leadership, enabled and supported by excellent administrative processes. These allow the board to concentrate on their role rather than getting bogged down in minutiae such as late and/or poor quality papers, unclear actions, inappropriate agenda items and unstructured debate leading to unclear outcomes.

Through our work with providers and observations of boards/committees over the years it is clear that there are some essential ingredients to an effective board. There is a direct correlation between effectiveness and the personnel and personalities sat around the table but there are elements of process and guiding principles that

need to be adhered to if boards are to secure the best outcomes from the time spent in meetings.

The regulators have over the years paid increasing attention to the effectiveness of leadership and the board. Firstly, through the development of Monitor's Board Governance Assurance Framework and more recently via the CQC's new inspection regimes culminating in the introduction of the Well Led Framework. This briefing paper intentionally steers clear of being a 'how to' guide on the Well Led framework and instead concentrates on core guiding principles essential to effective meeting management at any level within an organisation. This is in the hope that this briefing paper does not become yet another checklist of 'things to do' but forms part of how an organisation naturally conducts itself in its day to day business.

GOOD PRACTICE ELEMENTS

MEETING LOGISTICS

- Ensure that room bookings are made in plenty of time and are well communicated to all relevant stakeholders.
- Consider room acoustics and layouts when booking rooms. Large rooms and high ceilings are poor conductors of sound and public members may struggle to hear what is being said. Also consider if hearing loops are available in the room to assist those with hearing difficulties.
- Consider ease of access for those with a physical disability and ease of travel via public transport and parking arrangements.
- If iPad technologies (or similar) are to be used you need to ensure that robust and effective WiFi is available.
- Ensure that board papers are issued at least a week prior to the meeting to board members and made available for stakeholders in order that everyone has had adequate time to read through the papers and are capable of inputting into the discussions.

AGENDAS

- Creation of an annual work plan which reflects the strategic objectives, BAF contents and other mandatory aspects of the role and function of a board.
- Agendas should be set with reference to the annual work plan and agendas pre-populated with items from the annual work plan allowing sufficient time for debate and iteration.
- The board secretary (or similar) should ensure that all carry forward items from preceding minutes and/or action logs are included within the appropriate agenda.
- The agenda and its forward content should be subject to regular scrutiny and discussion by the board in order to remain relevant and create the opportunity for all board members to contribute i.e. the chair should not set the agenda in isolation without due

regard for the needs of the organisation and wishes of board members.

- Agendas should reflect an appropriate balance of strategic and operational items and ensure that adequate time is set aside for board members to gain assurance over achievement of the organisation's strategic objectives and quality priorities.
- Agendas should also ensure an appropriate balance of items for decision, for noting and for information only. An imbalance towards 'for noting' and 'for information only' might suggest an ineffective board and one that is not discharging its role effectively.
- Boards should be mindful of the length of the agenda and consequent impact upon duration of meetings and therefore effectiveness. Boards are not as attentive or effective in the fourth or fifth hour as they were in the first hour. Use of board workshops and other communication channels for 'for information only' items can be used to help streamline board agendas and meetings.
- The board should carefully consider the order of the agenda relative to current risks and performance to ensure that priority is given to the items requiring the full attention of the board. It is perfectly acceptable to alter the agenda running order meeting on meeting to reflect this i.e. whilst it is reasonable to commence each board meeting with a patient story this does not mean that all quality related matters must be taken first on the agenda all of the time irrespective of the urgency or importance of other non quality related matters.
- Indicative timings on agendas should be considered with caution. They are a great aid in planning the agenda to ensure there is sufficient time to cover the items listed but often published timings are used as a blunt instrument to curtail discussion. They can apply undue pressure on a chair to keep to the timings as to not do so might indicate poor chairmanship skills. There are occasions when the discussion has moved on from that initially envisaged when the timings were set and it is entirely appropriate therefore to extend the timing to allow suitable conclusions to be reached. It is better to insert timings onto the minutes of meetings so that boards can see where they actually spend their time (rather than indicatively)

and over a period can reflect on the appropriateness of the balance between strategic/operational matters and each subject matter heading e.g. quality, finance, strategy, workforce etc.

QUALITY OF PAPERS

- In this digital age where the use of electronic board papers is increasingly common it is all too easy to attach lengthy papers or externally written guidance/reports without any summarisation or interpretation of the contents. Whilst it could be argued that it is good practice to provide board members with the full facts, recognition should also be made of the limited time available to board members to devote to corporate matters. We have observed board/committee papers consisting of more than 500 pages and even up to 900+ pages on occasions. Despite this we do not subscribe to the view that trusts should be prescriptive about the length of papers. Rather, executive leads must take responsibility for producing papers that summarise the key points in sufficient detail to enable informed discussion without the addition of extraneous information.
- Each agenda item/paper should be suitably précised to ensure that board members are clear as to the context and purpose of the paper, the key issues/risks arising from the content and what is expected from the board in terms of decisions – do nothing should always be included as an option noting, approval etc. It is unacceptable for executive colleagues to merely append a paper of some length and allow Board members to read it and determine for themselves what they see as the key issues/risks. This can and does lead to fragmented and poorly focused discussions, oblique conversations often outside of the central thrust of what is required and difficulties for the Chair in pulling together the outcome of the debate and ensuring that the board fulfils its requirements consistent with why the paper was submitted to the board in the first place.
- The use of executive summaries can be an effective way of ensuring that the board is sighted on the context, purpose and expectations of a paper. The quality of executive summaries should be policed in the short term by the chair/CEO as part of the board

preparations prior to issue of the board pack. This will set a clear marker of expectations and help improve and maintain quality over executive summaries until such times that this becomes embedded practice.

- Front pages are in common use with boards and again are an area where quality of population can be poor and inconsistent. We have observed many instances of poorly populated front sheets where sections remain blank or are often subject to lengthy 'cut and paste' of the subject matter and become 'de facto' executive summaries thus duplicating elements of the actual paper.
- In some instances front sheets run to three or four pages in length and attempt to cover a multitude of requirements. Boards need to be clear about the purpose of the front sheet, ensure that the design reflects the purpose and ensure that they are populated in a consistent way which supports the board in conducting its operations rather than creating added confusion.
- Other elements of good practice when writing board papers include the need for greater use of forward look trajectories, being more action oriented, clear assignment of responsibilities aligned with action dates and importantly greater emphasis on how future assurances over impacts/improvements as a result of actions will be reported to the board/committee.
- A move to less word driven reports and more use of graphs, tables and bullet points as a presentational style would assist in the move from traditional (and descriptive) style reports which often describe the issue as opposed to informing the board what the organisation intends to do about the issue (who/what/when/how) i.e. the 'so what' (are we doing about it)?

CHAIRING

- The role and contribution of the chair is pivotal in ensuring that boards/committees are effective in their operation. A personally effective chair will undoubtedly run an effective board whilst the corollary is also true.
- Whilst there are a number of attributes that encompass a successful chair including their abilities to be the outward public face of the organisation and engage willingly and naturally with stakeholders,

there is also a need for great insightfulness and clarity of purpose to steer a path through the noise of board meetings, summarise agenda items effectively and ensure clear outcomes are captured.

- A good chair will assume that all board members come prepared to discuss agenda items having read through supporting papers, this obviates the need for executive leads to take up valuable board time presenting their papers.
- As well as the above it is imperative that a chair, chairs the meeting as opposed to directs the meeting. We have all encountered chairs who have been all too keen to steer board discussion on an agenda item by offering their views upfront prior to opening up the agenda item to the rest of the board for discussion. The best chairs are comfortable with allowing a free ranging debate and using their facilitation skills to steer discussions to keep them on track whilst at the same time not being seen to overly influence the outcome of the debate.
- As a board is jointly and severally liable for its actions it is important that all board members feel that they have had the opportunity to input into discussions. Equally, it is important for the chair to recognise when less forceful members of the board are being crowded out of discussions and naturally include them by seeking their opinion on such matters and ensuring that their voice is heard. It is also important then when a board member appears to have dropped out of proceedings for some time to subtly re-engage them in the discussion by overtly asking them their opinion on the agenda item thus reinforcing the point that it is not acceptable for board members to dip in and out of board meetings.
- Only in exceptional circumstances will the board vote on issues therefore it is for the chair to summarise the debate and agreed actions. On matters of assurance, it is essential that the chair allows the board time to explore any areas of concern raised before conclusions are reached and actions agreed.
- A good chair will also know and understand when to utilise the carrot or the stick and be able to hold the organisation and board members to account effectively without harming relations and destroying the unity of the board. The need for constructive

challenge is necessary at times in the board room as is the need to be supportive and a good chair will recognise when each is appropriate and strike the right balance.

POST MEETING

An often neglected aspect after a long board/ committee meeting is the post meeting wash up session. It is important that board members have the immediate opportunity for reflection and comment regarding the meeting just ended.

Good practice indicates that the use of a standardised question set will allow the conversation to flow more meaningfully and provide greater consistency of outcomes than an unstructured 'chat'. If a committee meeting, the outcomes from this post meeting reflection should help form part of the one page update to the board – particularly if a structured question set is utilised.

Questions should include:

- What key decisions did we make or what key outcomes did we arrive at today?
- Is there anything that requires escalating to the board as a result of today's discussions?
- Were any new risks identified that require capturing on the risk register/BAF?
- Was the quality of the papers sufficient to allow you to discharge your duties and the expectations of each paper?
- What worked well/did you enjoy from today's meeting?
- What didn't work as well as expected or raised concerns with you?
- Was the time allowed/taken on each agenda item sufficient?
- Anything else you wish to raise as a result of today's meeting?

The above post meeting structured questions allow the chair to populate the one page summary based on the inputs from all committee members as opposed to the chair's personal view being reflected within the update.

For further information
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