

TRUSTEE Q&A

BRIAN LAVERY

TRUSTEE OF THE ARK

EUROPEAN MANAGING DIRECTOR,
ACCUWEATHER



'May you live in interesting times,' goes the apocryphal curse. It's obviously preferable to spend one's days in peaceful, and historically irrelevant, periods. When it comes to serving on a nonprofit board, the blessing on the flipside — the boring tranquility of an uneventful director's term — doesn't sound great either.

No one wants to serve on the board of an organisation that becomes interesting for the wrong reasons, and ends up in the newspapers. It's a trustee's responsibility to prevent that from happening, by ensuring that risk management functions are executed effectively. But who wants to spend years attending board meetings where everything proceeds exactly according to plan, approving financial reports, respectfully challenging management to ensure that the organisation delivers on its strategic objectives? A balance is needed. First and foremost, directors sign up to provide governance (and if you're not really sure what that means, it's time to do some reading). For some of us, the most rewarding moments are when that governance role expands to include helping to solve really sticky problems. I served for five years as a director of BirdWatch Ireland, the country's largest environmental NGO, and am into my sixth year on the board of the Ark, Ireland's cultural centre for children. I joined both boards in 2012, when both organisations, like most Irish nonprofits that survived the global financial crisis, were still coping with the impact of the downturn. And, like all nonprofits, plenty of interesting times were ahead.

My personal favourites have been the challenges that, thankfully, come up only rarely. They make big demands on a board member — and they're when trustees have the opportunity to step up to make a real difference.

Choosing leadership

It's slightly terrifying when a chief executive resigns. That individual has likely served as the board's eyes and ears in the organisation. They've provided leadership and direction for staff, as well as reassurance to external stakeholders that all is well at the charity. Losing that consistent presence poses major tests. Is there a succession plan? Will the transition period be handled smoothly, with the least disruption to operations and to personnel? Will the new leader be onboarded to make them optimally effective as quickly as possible? Failing to execute these processes well can cause real damage.

But choosing new leadership is also a wonderfully exciting (even ‘interesting’) opportunity. Searching for top management, and recruiting and hiring, involves debates at board level about what type of leader is needed. It forces trustees to take a hard look at themselves and the work they’ve been doing, and to be bluntly honest about what has been going well, and what could be going better.

The selection process itself also prompts such thinking. Interviews allow the board to seek out independent points of view, to see the charity through a fresh set of eyes. Good interviews should encourage potential CEOs or senior executives to express their imaginations and ambitions freely, since they’re not yet feeling the constraints of budgets and resources that they’ll have to cope with in the role.

These transitions don’t come along often, but when they do, it’s a rare chance to tap into new sources of vision, creativity, and energy.

Setting strategy

Setting strategy, and ensuring its delivery, is one of a board’s core functions. As with leadership transitions, creating a new strategy, or fundamentally revising an existing one, doesn’t happen often. At most, this should occur every few years; otherwise there would be no time to implement the plan.

When that moment comes along, it’s another opportunity to look in the mirror. Strategic thinking requires the board (and the executive) to reassess the state of the organisation, the landscape in which it’s operating (competition, funding, etc.), and the social needs that it’s working to address.

Ideally the board has hands-on involved in this process: it’s time to get in front of the whiteboard or flipcharts with markers and post-its. It can be heavy, intellectual work. But once it’s completed, and there’s a clear strategy document that internal and external stakeholders have helped devise and have bought into, literally everything else comes more easily.

The Ark launched a strategy last year which clearly delineates core activities into four areas — excellence, access, advocacy, and sustainability — that are all clearly in service of its mission, and that help the board prioritise its time and attention. The document provides a structural foundation all of the charity’s activity, so that all staff, and the board, can see how their work fits in.

Managing a crisis

As mentioned above, risk management is a fundamental part of the board’s governance role. Directors are explicitly tasked with ensuring that the charity has robust processes across all areas of operations — and that it is implementing them effectively — to minimise the possibility of any problems arising.

But the world can be unpredictable. And sometimes, to use another proverb, s**t happens.

A major funding source may suddenly dry up. Customers, stakeholders, and even staff may behave in unexpected ways. External factors, like the weather or political events, may severely damage assets or organisational performance. Dealing with those situations isn’t everyone’s cup of tea. Often it makes sense to have a selection of trustees run point as a mini committee, devising and even executing a solution, while reporting back to the board.

It's in these situations that I've learned the most from my fellow board members. What seems at first glance to be the right solution may not be the best one, so it helps to have a mix of temperaments dealing with crises — especially to mix expertise with cooler heads. Reputation should be one of a charity's most cherished assets; it takes years to earn and seconds to lose.

A crisis isn't really resolved, though, just when it passes by without reputational damage. The final step is reviewing whether and how the situation could have been avoided, with processes that could have been better designed or executed. In addition to resolving the urgent problems of today, good crisis management helps to prevent them from recurring tomorrow.