

# Board behaviour styles

What does a penguin, a shark, a dog, a rabbit and a crab have to do with leadership?

It is my contention that the most important ingredient in organisational effectiveness is leadership – leadership provided by the board of trustees. I find that effective board leadership is a product of both style and culture of the board. So if you want to influence board effectiveness, board competency is important, but board style can be even more so.

Many challenges that boards face are a consequence of board culture, board style or very specific idiosyncrasies of the board. I believe there are three important stages of governing an organisation well. First, ensuring that the right resources are in place; then having competent trustees; and finally, identifying performance criteria and measuring one's self against these.

In other words you have the right people and the right tools so now you can govern

well. On reflection, although these areas are a pre-requisite for good governance, they will be undermined or even made useless if the board behaviour is inconsistent with good practice.

Some of the typical challenges that boards face:

- the power of the board to control management (see dog later on);
- the difficulty of separating the board's role from that of management (see bee later on);
- trustees have different roles to play which may at times be in tension with each other (see shark later);
- the increasing demands and burdens that trustees face (see rabbit later);
- the voluntary nature of boards (see penguin later); and
- trustees do not get along and seek to undermine each other (see crab later).

The complexity of the role of board members in the third sector where the mix of social and environmental goals is hard to measure makes attracting the right type of trustee difficult.

This adds to the difficulty in getting the culture right. This difficulty can be compounded when a trustee is recruited for their professional expertise and cannot appreciate the context within which the charity operates.

Until the culture of a board is tackled it will be a real challenge to fully utilise the skills and expertise of the board individually and collectively. All trustees need to buy into one collective vision, having a shared game plan to achieve this vision. Unless this is done successfully, creating ambassadors in and outside of the board meeting will be nigh on impossible.

Let me explain some of the typical cultures that I have come across.



I would start by simplifying the behaviour of boards into six animal categories which will be referred to as styles. Note that although there are positive aspects of each style, I will use these examples to highlight some of the negative aspects of each of them. I am aware however, that circumstance may sometimes create a particularly negative culture. For example: financial crisis; over burdensome regulations or a problematic environment may all have an impact on board culture.

## Board styles

- Dog – the directors of this type of board are only there to rubber stamp what the executive or a dominant chair has put on the table. They will do as they are told.
- Bee – the directors of this type of board want to get involved in too much detail and examine every area that the executive is working on.
- Shark – each director is only there to represent their own interest group and they will fight to have their point of view heard and held, regardless of the overall mission.
- Rabbit – this board is there to check that nothing goes wrong. They have been frozen by the glare of the potential problems that could come about and spend their time just ensuring that they do not get themselves into trouble.
- Penguin – this is where all directors are concerned with getting on with each other. What is important is that no one is made to feel different and uncomfortable. The more alike each member is the more the board feels comfortable.
- Crab – this is where the board members are always looking to catch the executive out or vice versa or where board members are hostile with each other and always dragging each other down.

So what is the conclusion? What type of behaviour style should a board adopt? During one of the workshops I recently delivered to an organisation, the board tried to identify an animal to exemplify good board behaviour. There was a lengthy debate about using a lion or an eagle.



- Lion – seen to be bold, authoritative and powerful. Lions look to seize the advantage, taking many small unobtrusive steps closer to power over a long period of time. They will patiently plan, wait and make their move, lead in a new direction; face challenges head on; expand the territory; and put their strength, power or position to use.
- Eagle – this is the strategic forward-thinking board. Eagles fly high and scan the terrain and are then able to focus.

General Sun Tzu, the Chinese military strategist wrote in the sixth century BC: 'All men can see how the battle is won by the tactics I use: what no man can see is the strategy whereby victory is achieved.'

We understand that having all of the required governance competencies is a prerequisite for having an effective organisation. However this is not enough and the strategy must be to ensure that governance is more than compliance.

The defining factor then is not how well the organisation is governed, but how well the board works together to follow the governance principles that they have identified.

Going back to the quote made by General Sun Tzu we see the results of an effective organisation by the discipline it adopts. What we do not always see is the hard work required to ensure that the board works well together. ●

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