

Reflections on Charity Governance

(5 minute read)

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On 26th May, I had the privilege of being the keynote speaker at the Charity Governance Awards 2022. The Awards are sponsored and organised by The Clothworkers' Company, Reach Volunteering, NPC and Prospectus, and you can find out more about the Awards, including this year's shortlist and winners, [here](#). There are five categories relating to: diversity, equity and inclusion; digital; risk; and impact.

I thought it may be of interest to share some extracts from my speech, which I have adapted so that it works in this written format. My speech focussed primarily on the importance of charity governance, and the important leadership role that charity Trustees can play. I started by acknowledging that the last two Award ceremonies had taken place online due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and how much it meant to be able to come together in person this year. I shared my hope that we would be able to come together and show each other care and compassion, and that we would no doubt experience a great deal of joy and hope over the course of the evening. I reflected on how important it is to hold on to such feelings in the face of a myriad of intersecting and seemingly intractable issues that people and our planet face right now. We have multiple generations born across two centuries grappling with the global climate and nature crises as an environmental, economic, societal and political issue. In the UK we are faced with political systems that are not meeting our needs, an erosion and rolling back of our legislative rights, including on how we campaign and how we vote, a mental health epidemic, a ubiquity of digital and technological solutions that may also be exacerbating the problems we face, and economic instability which includes rising costs of living, inflation and instability in global economic markets. This list is of course not exhaustive, and could go on. Instead, I then reflected on what this means for the charity sector and civil society more generally.

The obvious answer is that our work is never more needed. However, as we strive to address both the symptoms and the root causes of these issues, we must ask ourselves whether we are delivering charitable work that is justice and equity based, charitable work that empowers and enables and seeks to eradicate disinformation and stereotypes, and charitable work that centres diversity, equity and inclusion and seeks to be genuinely representative of the communities we are working with and for.

Trustee Boards are essential in answering these questions and addressing these challenges, and I decided to use my speech to share what I think makes the best and most effective Boards, based on my own experiences as someone who sits on several Boards and works directly to the Board at John Ellerman Foundation. I explained that for me, the very best Boards are the ones that recognise they are part of the problem and are striving to be part of the solution. They are the Boards that are able to take the swirl of words that one associates with Boards, like duty, responsibility, effectiveness, words that are heavy, sometimes ominous, a little opaque or high level even, and instead come together as a group of people with an interest or cause area in common and work together, not just with their fellow Board members, but with the people who are leading and running the charity on a day-to-day basis and the people who are using and benefitting from the charity. They are the Boards that understand they are part of a bigger we. They are the Boards that are able to think strategically and over the short, medium and longer term. They are the Boards that are purpose driven, and above all can operate with a balance of humility and confidence in the face of challenges and obstacles.

They are also the Boards that look at the report titled [‘Trustee diversity: who is applying, and who is appointed?’](#) released by Reach Volunteering (one of the sponsors of the Charity Governance Awards), in October 2021 that found based on Charity Commission data, 92% of Trustees are white, two-thirds are male and the average age is between 55 to 64, and that the lack of diversity is not due to a lack of interest from under-represented groups, but caused by things like recruitment processes, including often a lack of an open recruitment exercise, and say this isn’t good enough. They are the Boards that know that homogeneous groups cannot resolve the challenges we face, nor can homogeneous groups fully embrace and recognise the opportunities ahead of us. Our success as a sector, our success as a society, depends on our embrace and pursuit of diversity, equity and inclusion.

I reflected that now more than ever it is vital that we strive for better governance within the sector, and that whilst the Charity Governance Awards matter, I hoped for the day when the exemplar abilities of the Trustee Boards shortlisted for Awards became the norm and were ubiquitous throughout our vital sector. I shared my belief that if this doesn’t happen, then charity Boards risk obsolescence. That’s why I think we need Board Trustees that are drawn to their roles because of their values, ethics and experiences. Board Trustees that are willing to be bold and brave. Board Trustees that apply intuition, but are also open to learning and evolving over time. Board Trustees that are self-aware, curious and committed to navigating their complex operating environments. Board Trustees that operate with humility but also embrace the responsibilities of their role with confidence. Board Trustees that pursue the possible as well as the perfect. Board Trustees that are striving to operate as a credible and committed group of people who wish to serve not just the charity of which they are a Trustee, but civil society as a whole.

I ended by saying that we can delay no longer in achieving this vision of what a Trustee is, can and should be, and that we must do all that we can now and in the coming years and decades to imagine and implement new ways of being for people, planet and society.

I am very grateful to the Charity Governance Awards for inviting me to be their keynote speaker and in awe of all the charities that were shortlisted for the awards.