

Listen to your toes

This is the first in a new series by Martin Farrell that looks in a light-hearted, but nevertheless serious way, at some of the more subtle issues facing trustee boards.

Is it only me? In a meeting the other day, a rather important one as it happens, I suddenly got a terrible itch on my left foot. As I was presenting at the time, the option of removing my shoe and having a good scratch was not an attractive one, particularly as the room was laid out boardroom-style so we could all see what was going on under the table. I suffered and, in time, the moment passed.

OK I guess I know it's not only me – we all have things of all sorts going on under the table. But are we listening to our toes or suffering in silence?

Under all the boardtalk (my thanks to the Drifters 1964 classic for inspiring this column title) there's a rich world of endless fascination and we can all tune into it. And we and our board meetings will be the better for it.

So try it – listen to your toes. Do they want to kick that guy on the other side who is saying the same thing now for the fourth, (or is it the fifth?) time? Are they itching to get moving on to the next agenda item – 'come on chair, wrap it up'? Or maybe there's a bit of toe curling with embarrassment when no-one remembered to welcome the new trustee to her first meeting and then tried to cover it up with an awkward half-apology.

Then there's just 'toeing' the line – I'm not here to take on any work, rock the boat or actually do anything too challenging. So I'll just weakly agree with everything.

Not listening to your toes risks accumulating a tension which is difficult for the human organism to bear. So the standard response is to go into a Meeting Room Suspended Animation (MRSA). We've become skilled at being there but not there – eyes open, papers in front of us, an occasional comment of dubious value. It's serious and it's catching.

Alternatives to succumbing to the mind-numbing MRSA are no better – lobbing in random toxic and peripheral observations, or – even more



"Itchy toes, no energy, short attention span? You've got MRSA."

common – not turning up to the meeting at all or coming late.

But, my friends, I suggest there is another way. It calls for lots of toe listening, a measure of self-reflection and generosity too. Deep breath, pause, raise your eyes to the noble cause for which you have all come together. And find the simplest words to say what we need to say.

It's not easy but, yes, we can find the courage within ourselves to do what we know is best. I managed it last week. I might have kicked him but I found a private moment and said 'Chris, I want to hear what you have to say. And I heard you the first time.' 'So I should say it once and then shut up?' he responded. 'That's it Chris, I'm listening to you, so you don't have to repeat yourself' I said.

It was better than kicking him under the table or walking out or succumbing to the dreaded MRSA. ●



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