

Enough's enough – how much information do trustees *really* need?

'Mummy what's happening?' The child's incredulous voice filled the vast dark theatre space. All we could see were coloured shapes of light moving gracefully in the blackness, apparently of their own volition. The child had spoken for everyone.

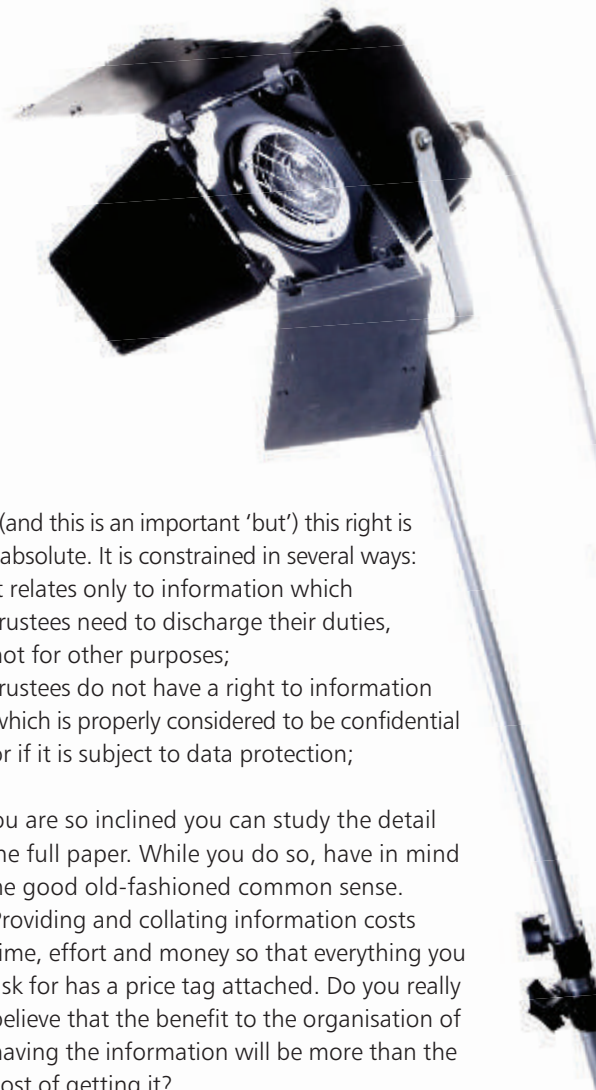
Only when the final curtain went up, was the illusion revealed by actors clothed in black who had disappeared in the darkness, leaving visible only the balls of light they were carrying.

We spend much of our time not knowing what's going on behind the scenes. We know we have engaged skilled performers who are working well together and are content to focus on the outcomes of their efforts. Quite right too.

So far so good – except that in the theatre, I was not responsible for the quality of the production. But around the board table I am – and that can make me nervous. And that nervousness can drive me to make too many demands for information to reassure myself that everything is working well.

One of the case studies at this year's Trustee Exchange conference focused on a well-run charity in which a new and keen trustee was asking for ever more information, placing an increasing burden on senior staff. This culminated in strongly-worded letters flying about and upset all round. Oh dear.

So when is enough information enough? The very helpful and authoritative **The rights of charity trustees to information concerning their charity** paper by the Charity Law Association lays out the law on the matter – which broadly is that trustees have the right to receive the information which they reasonably need to govern the organisation.



But (and this is an important 'but') this right is not absolute. It is constrained in several ways:

- it relates only to information which trustees need to discharge their duties, not for other purposes;
- trustees do not have a right to information which is properly considered to be confidential or if it is subject to data protection;

If you are so inclined you can study the detail in the full paper. While you do so, have in mind some good old-fashioned common sense.

- Providing and collating information costs time, effort and money so that everything you ask for has a price tag attached. Do you really believe that the benefit to the organisation of having the information will be more than the cost of getting it?
- What does your asking for information say about the balance you want to strike between the board thinking long-term and broadly (strategy) and the executive getting stuff done (operations)? Are you sure you are only asking for information which you need to fulfil your role as strategists?
- Are the leading trustees being effective leaders, helping the board to handle the uncertainty which inevitably accompanies trusteeship?
- Do the board and executive have a shared and explicit understanding about how much information is provided, when and how?

The child was moved to wonder at what she saw. Let us too allow ourselves to be so moved – and only ask for information about what's going on behind the scenes when we're sure we really need it. ●

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