

A happy veneer

Smiles all round. All jolly friendly. A happy veneer. A dysfunctional board drifting smilingly into an uncertain future.

The staff are absolutely wonderful you know. They work so hard and always stay late. They're terribly committed.

Tea or coffee? Lovely to see you. Sorry we're running over a bit. But we'll be with you before too long. Thank you so much for coming.

Who was that management guru who, noting that he was paid a hefty daily rate to diagnose businesses problems, said he basically knew, after just 15 minutes, most of what was going on under the surface just by sitting in reception and looking and listening?

I thought of him during some recent brief board encounters.

The chair had recently retired and thought it would be rather nice to 'give something back' after a life in the public service in which she had succeeded by avoiding conflict and difficulty. You can spend years getting by without annoying too many people and not getting much done either. She seemed to get on with everyone. She wouldn't say boo to a goose.

There's no vice chair, no strong voices and a table of benign smiles. Sorry I've lost my papers. Sorry didn't have time to prepare. Sorry I didn't respond to the CE emails (I get hundreds every day you know).

The complaining emails go to everyone except the person who is being complained about.

All terribly polite. And terribly concerned. And so, so supportive too.

But where is the scrutiny, where is the stretch, the challenge? Where is the critical analysis of trends in the marketplace or the intelligence on what other providers in the field are doing? Where is the sharp strategic thinking, the looking wide and far, making sharp but painful decisions to avoid potholes on the path ahead?

Where is the voice saying this just isn't good enough? And who is courageous enough to openly acknowledge the niggles and tensions which lurk just below the surface?

If it all seems to be going so swimmingly well and full of smiles, pause and ponder a moment and consider the possibility that this board is just as dysfunctional as the family with acting-out teenagers. But just not as noisy.

With no experience of facing difficulty and handling struggle and strife and tensions around the table, this board may not exist in five years.

So the smart smiley board would do well to start practising a new kind of vocabulary.

"This really doesn't make sense. We can't change our services in this way. You haven't convinced me that your proposal is going to work (do you want to try again?)."

"Surely we can improve by more than 5 per cent? Come on, we really need to do more than that."

"I am the only person here who thinks we're charging too little for services (and I'm sure I'm right)."

"Those figures don't make sense to me. I want them laid out so that I don't have to work so hard to understand them."

"I've thought about this a lot and I'm sure we have to make redundancies now so we will be able to set a balanced budget next year."

Five years from now...happy yes. Veneer no. ●

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