

Shine a light ... into the vacuum

It was a simple question, but was met by a complex answer.

'How many trustees do you have?' Then followed the lengthy explanation ... about the two new recent arrivals, the three who occasionally came to committee meetings and the one who had not been seen for months and who had only turned up once since she was appointed a couple of years ago.

Then I heard about the chair who was crashing about in the vacuum thus created.

I was speaking with a chief executive who was having painful struggles with his board. The empty seats around the table contributed to a very tricky situation in which the chair appeared to be acting without the authority of his colleagues around the table – quite simply because they were not ... around the table.

Yes indeed nature abhors a vacuum. A trustee being there in name only allows a situation to develop which can easily whirlwind out of control.

Do not allow this to happen.

Yes things change – any of us can get another job abroad; maybe we get ill, maybe dependents need more of our time. Or maybe the time has come to pursue other interests as your initial inspiration drains away. Don't just be absent. Make a plan, inform others and organise a decent departure.

If you're a chair or vice-chair and you see that fellow trustees are not following this good advice, take charge and sort out any gaps which absent trustees have left. (I've just seen this happen effectively and swiftly on the International Association of Facilitators' board

when two people needed to move on to other things in the last three months). Act, don't delay.

If you see fellow trustees not turning up, not following through on promises and being absent, don't just sit there, tell someone. Shine a spotlight on the vacuum and make something happen. (I ask for patience from scientists who would no doubt point out that shining a light in a vacuum won't work.)

If you are a chief executive it's more tricky – and it's even more important. These are your employers, and your happiness and your effectiveness depend on how they function as a group. Shine a light. Talk with whichever trustees will listen. Hope is not enough, taking action might be.

Maybe your predecessors have been smart and put in place a formal requirement that if trustees are inactive they are no longer eligible to sit on the board. Excellent – take the document out of the folder and circulate it at the next board meeting.

The passion which drives us as trustees and directors of UK and international boards is a necessary but not sufficient condition for success. As trustees we also have an obligation to turn up and do what we said we were going to do and not to allow a vacuum which will invite all sorts of mischief.

For my struggling chief executive, the jury is out. The two new trustees, whom I encouraged him to invite to join the board, appear competent and may be moving in to fill the vacuum ... ●

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