

Guidance Notes: Effective Challenge of the Senior Leadership Team

This Guidance Note is aimed largely at first-term Governors.

Introduction

The college governing body is ultimately responsible for the performance of the whole college and in particular for the performance of the Principal and the Senior Leadership team. This team is accountable to the college governing body for their own performance and so how the governing body enables the team to operate at their best is an important role.

The relationships between the governing body and the SLT are a key determinant for the success of the college. To be successful these relationships should be built on mutual trust and confidence so that all the dealings are characterised by openness and transparency and a high level of confidentiality. The SLT is never seeking to hide or disguise difficult information and the governing body is never seeking to catch the SLT out.

Challenge is clearly essential to ensure that complacency and coasting are avoided and a culture of continuous improvement is fostered. But challenge also needs to be coupled with support. At its best the relationship between the governing body and the SLT is a partnership where each accepts its different roles and works together to develop and deliver the agreed strategy for the college.

In particular the triangular relationship between the Chair, the Principal and the Clerk is important in determining the relationships and the effective presentation and interrogation of appropriate data. The management of meetings both formal and informal are also critical in enabling the appropriate balance of support and challenge.

Another way of describing the balance of support and challenge is as trusting and verifying: governors need to trust college managers but they also have a responsibility to verify that what is being presented is accurate, timely and significant.

This guidance note will suggest ways of developing the effective balance of support and challenge in the relationship between the governing body and of the SLT and also identify the critical issues of effective meetings and asking powerful questions.

Ofsted stresses the importance of support and challenge by governors in phrases such as keenly honed understanding of the college's performance and a high level of informed challenge.... increasingly adept at interpreting these reports to ask searching questions of college leaders... governors offer highly effective support and critical challenge to senior managers... governors are very well informed and provide excellent support to senior leaders. They ask the right questions to ensure managers are sufficiently held to account.....

'Governance is the act of governing – not managing. Governance provides strategic leadership and direction to an organisation. It sets and approves policies and the budget, defines expectations, delegates powers, and verifies performance towards delivering its strategic aims and objectives. The most important aspect is an appropriate division of responsibilities between strategic governance by the governing body and operational management by the College's senior management team led by the principal. This approach would be underpinned by the right level of checks and balances.'

(Definition of good governance from Creating Excellence in College Governance, report by Susan Pember, AoC 2013)

Balancing support and challenge - the critical friend

Effective governance is dependent on the levels of understanding inside the board, linked to the knowledge, skills, experience and professional abilities of all of those who work together to carry out the tasks of governance. These activities are underpinned by the effective working relationship and team ethos between the chair of governors, the voluntary non-executive board members (Governors) and the principal/CEO and other strategic leadership team members, and the balance of board time spent on compliance, support and challenge.

An effective balance between support and challenge is achieved from the way in which board members:

- Provide support by volunteering their time and by contributing and updating their skills, knowledge and experience to help the governance and strategic effectiveness of their college
- Use their background experience to challenge the assumptions being used by college managers when setting long- and short-term strategy as well as planning and setting targets
- Monitoring and scrutinising the college's performance in terms of quality of delivery, client and staff responsiveness to changing market needs, and financial planning and outcomes.
- Maximise the contribution to strategy that Governors make to the College – the emphasis of Governors' statutory role is to set the vision and educational character (i.e. direction of travel) for the College, therefore this should be reflected in the decisions and debates between Governors and the Senior Leadership Team

In outstanding colleges both governors and senior managers benefited from a culture that displays both support and challenge in a spirit of partnership where all are committed to the success of the college. Governors seek to concentrate on things that matter such as:

- Using a dashboard of key performance indicators that are RAG rated and focus on essential identified targets.

- Very good relationships between Governors and senior team: extremely open and frank, with both Governors and Managers able to raise concerns.
- Knowing what questions to ask and overcoming the fear of asking a 'naïve' question. Governors need to know the yearly cycle of quality information since different questions are needed at different times in the year.

For governors to exercise the role of governance in supervising, monitoring, and ensuring the strategic direction and agreed targets are being achieved, one of the key skills is asking the right questions.

Key questions for governors

Am I clear as to how this decision or debate links to the Governor role?

Do I have the level of understanding needed to ask searching questions of senior managers?

Am I provided with structured, accurate and up-to-date performance information that relates to strategy?

Do I understand the local and national environment within which the college is operating?

Do I analyse and reflect on my own performance, both as a member of the team and as individual board member and have a commitment to my ongoing development?

How do I contribute to the development of the college in the longer term?

What is my role in relation to Teaching, Learning and Assessment, and challenge?

Where does the assurance come from that all strategic issues are on track, or factored in to future planning?

Do I and the governing body drill down where necessary into the assurances given by senior managers?

Papers and reports to Governors

Enabling a good balance between support and challenge requires clear communication between the senior team and the board. As the majority of board business is conducted through reports and papers, the quality and timing of these is imperative to effective challenge.

Papers and reports should clearly indicate what their purpose is, and what is required from the board members. For example:

'To note'; update for information

Sometimes called 'silent papers', with an assumption attached that they have been read, and only questions for clarification are asked.

Clear recommendations for discussion and decision

Do you debate or do you agree?

How often do you receive what you ask for

How the topic links

- to the strategic plan/ mission/values
- to key performance indicators?
- to the achievements of learners?
- to the quality strategy?
- to the financial position?
- to the risk register?

Are the right links in place to enable you to constructively challenge? What is the link between the Strategic Plan, the Self Assessment, the Risk Register and performance management?

Review questions for papers and reports.

- How much time is spent on debate vs. receiving updates or information?
- Is there a good balance of debating time between the core business, finance and resources, not just in each meeting but also over the academic year?
- How manageable are your meeting agendas and agenda items?
- How do you split strategic debate and routine Governance?
- Do you debate what makes your board 'tick'?
- Do you ask for recommendations that require debate?
- Have you taken time to discuss the agreed level of discussions and debate – what is a 'strategic level' of debate?
- Reporting by exception – is your challenge directed to right areas?
- Do you have clear cover sheets to reports – directing your attention to key issues and which need firm decision/resolution?
- Do reports use visual 'maps' to show where a decision fits in strategy?
- Do you know and have you discussed as a board what makes Governors into 'critical friends'? (see guidance note on becoming a critical friend)

Creating an atmosphere conducive to effective challenge

Whilst structure and formal compliance are essential to board performance, how the board behaves and how the Board of Governors work as a team is fundamental to providing an environment where challenge is productive, respected and effective in achieving more robust decisions.

Implicit is the assertion that board members who work more effectively as a team are able to provide a better level of governance and strategic leadership with a good balance of support and challenge.

The concept of the 'Learning Board' is one where boards operate with the values of the organisation, continuously reviewing their contribution and learning to improve their effectiveness.

"...organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together." (Senge, 1990)

Patrick Lencioni in his work on 'The five dysfunctions of teams' identifies five behaviours required for effective team activity:

- Exercise of trust
- Challenge and constructive debate
- Commitment to and clarity of values and aims
- Achieving accountability through confronting difficult issues
- Focusing on results and collective outcomes

(The Five Dysfunctions of a Team. By Patrick Lencioni.)

Questions for governors:

Taking each behaviour above, can you evidence how these are demonstrated in your board meetings?

How are team dynamics and effective challenge evaluated in your routine board self- evaluation?

Are there 'quiet ones' on your board, and how do other governors support them to contribute?

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See also guidance notes on:

What is Governance?

Governors' role - teaching, learning and assessment.

Asking Powerful Questions.