

‘We need to talk’ – the trick is to think before you speak

Good and professional behaviour is critical to board effectiveness.



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Governance expert Tesse Akpeki gives guidance on how to hold difficult conversations

The ICSA guidance, *Improving charity boardroom behaviours*, stresses the importance of encouraging positive behaviours in and outside the boardroom. The guidelines remind us that policies, procedures and protocols only go so far in promoting good governance. To be impactful, trustees have to demonstrate a range of skills, experience, attributes and characteristics, and a mindset focused on the benefit of the charity. Six C's essential for high-performing boards are:

- Having the right **catalyst** or motivators
- Demonstrating **commitment** and engagement
- Adopting a **challenging** and independent mind-set
- Using a **collaborative** and **constructive** style, and
- Having the **courage** to remain focused.

The importance of social dynamics is underpinned by the revised *Charity Governance Code*, which moves the governance debate towards the way each trustee performs their duties and engages with key stakeholders. Key to effective leadership and governance is embracing conflict, harnessing constructive tensions and dealing with sticky behaviours. Being equipped to have that delicate or sensitive conversation is crucial to achieve any level of success.

Take time to talk honestly, rationally and clearly if there is a problem that needs dealing with. It is a really important process to get right. How can you feel prepared and in the right frame of mind?

Are you good at having difficult conversations? Try these strategies next time you are having a difficult conversation, and see if they help.

1. Have the conversation sooner rather than later. Procrastination makes the situation worse. Do not postpone the difficult situation because it won't be easy or it will potentially drain your energies and emotions.
2. Stick to the facts. Describe the behaviour that has

led you to speak to the individual. Have all the facts and evidence ready. Describe the impact of the behaviour on others, colleagues or yourself. Ensure the person understands why there has to be a change in behaviour. Have to hand the relevant standards, procedures and policies.

3. Focus on the future. Explore what could be different in the future. Depending on the nature of the conversation, this could be specific procedures that need to be put in place, or simply a verbal commitment from the individual to take what has been said on board and act on it.
4. Show respect. No matter how frustrating the issue is, always ensure you show respect for the individual as a person. Focus on the behaviours, not the individual. Provide time for the individual to digest, respond, reflect, and connect with what is at stake.
5. Listen. Even where the issue is perfectly clear and must be addressed, ensure the individual's voice is heard. Model a process that shows respect and dignity for all.
6. Stay focused and be clear about the purpose for having the conversation. Don't allow your emotions to get the better of you. Be professional, compassionate and empathetic. Be clear in making your request for the action(s) you would like to see next.
7. After the conversation reflect on how you could have done better and then move on. A good board is continually learning.

Naming the elephant in the room plays a starring role in healthy governance. Being equipped to have those delicate conversations may be just what makes the board special.

Find out more

The ICSA guidance, 'Improving charity boardroom behaviours', is at <https://www.icsa.org.uk/knowledge/resources/improving-charity-boardroom-behaviours>

And the Charity Governance Code is at <https://www.charitygovernancecode.org/en/front-page>