

## Behaviour matters

**Understanding the emotional drivers behind behaviours can help chief executives and trustees to lead effectively and make good decisions.**

**Tesse Akpeki** explains how best to put behaviour theory into practice within your organisation.



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Tesse is a consultant, trainer, Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution-accredited mediator and a non-practising solicitor. She has worked extensively with third sector organisations nationally and internationally. Tesse is an accredited coach, specialising in governance development and leadership.

Board-CEO relations can fray if not carefully nurtured. Despite their best intentions, executives and board members fall prey to cognitive and organisational biases that get in the way of good decision-making and effective working.

The Behavioural Insights Team – also known as the ‘Nudge Unit’ – a social purpose company partly owned by the Cabinet Office, draws on behavioural science studies to understand the choices people make and how they behave in the real-world context. Indications are that poor outcomes are more likely to be due to bad processes rather than bad people.

How much information do trustees need, from whom, by when and how is it transmitted? Too little and they will be misinformed; too much, they will be swamped by day-to-day operational issues.

Listen to how board-savvy CEOs talk about their boards and the governing process. They spend 20–25% of their time working on governance matters, developing agendas for committee and board meetings, chairing executive-team meetings and ensuring that materials going to the board are high quality.

Behavioural insights tell us that when stakeholders are separated from an organisation’s operations, they are less likely to fully understand and appreciate the value being created. This reduces satisfaction, trust and loyalty.

### Putting behaviour theory into practice

- Identify bias busters. Recognise when short-term tactical needs are prioritised over longer-term objectives. Incentives encourage a focus on the future.
- Apply techniques to reduce conformity. Make it easier to challenge existing views – overcoming power dynamics by speaking up.
- Anticipate what could go wrong by imagining the initiative has already failed and asking – why did this happen?

Pre-mortems help boards and senior managers to pre-empt project failure.

- Agree an approach for the chair to follow if he or she needs to contact senior managers between meetings.
- Increase transparency about the decision-making processes.
- The chair and the CEO should keep on the lookout for ways to foster feelings of ownership among board members. These links can be strengthened with access to peer support networks, coaching and mentoring schemes.
- Independent reviews increase accountability. Facilitators encourage open and honest conversations. Identify useful ways of regulating communication and sharing information. A monthly briefing paper provides a structure for keeping trustees informed. Build leadership excellence through regular assessments, performance evaluations and reality checks of the board, chair and the CEO.
- Provide board members with speaking opportunities and opportunities to meet with key stakeholders. Recognise their efforts for creativity and innovation.
- Board members could periodically attend quarterly management meetings in an observational capacity to better understand the scenarios senior managers have to navigate.
- Employ tact, fairness and diplomacy to shape relationships and implement policies. Emotional and social intelligence cuts through testing situations while building trust and confidence.

Celebrate successes and hope. The chair as chief governance officer and the CEO as chief board developer clarify the board’s governing role, fine-tuning the board’s governance structure and mapping out the processes and behaviours for involving the board in its critical governing functions.