

How's your porridge?

Goldilocks got it just right. Not too hot, not too cold, but just right

As charity trustees we have to do the same – if we get too close to what's happening, things can get much too hot to handle and we'll get our collective fingers burnt. If we are too far away it's much too cold and our porridge turns grey and lumpy. Unpleasant either way.

As trustees, we cannot know what's going on most of the time. And of course that's fine. Even if we are speaking with the chief executive or staff members every week and score full attendance at board and other meetings, we are unaware of 99 per cent of the operational detail of what is happening day-to-day.

So we have to learn to hold the uncertainty of not knowing, whilst at the same time shouldering the weight of trustee responsibility. This paradox ignites a painful inner pressure which, somehow, we have to find a way of coping with. If we can't, things can go badly wrong.

For acevo, I support chief executives who are in crisis, because they have a well founded fear that they might lose their jobs. So from the 'other side', I often see the chaotic consequences of trustees failing to cope with their inner pressure. Suffering from emotional incontinence, they meddle, they get too close, they are inconsistent and too demanding – the messy outpouring/product of their inability to hold themselves in.

Others contain the pressure by holding their breath, tightening every muscle, not moving and by giving up, but without actually resigning. Not moving, for example by not answering the phone or responding to e-mails and coming late to meetings or not at all, and by being strangers to the staff team.

Frozen, they abdicate, abandoning the chief executive to their fate. Cold porridge. (Until one day perhaps – what a foul/distasteful/gruesome thought – the pressure just builds up too much...)

So knowing when our porridge is not too hot, not too cold, but just right is core curriculum for trustees. To remain live to what is happening whilst at the same time not knowing every detail, calls for an emotional skill and rigour which



"These replace your existing trays."

comes naturally to some but which the rest of us have to learn by faltering practice.

But happily our learning does not have to be done alone. We can dip our collective spoon and taste with our collective tongue and compare notes with our fellow trustees. And we can compare notes with the chief executive and staff. After all we're all stirring the same pot.

So let's all stir and taste together asking how is it for you, not just once like Goldilocks did, but from time to time and as often as circumstances change and as staff and trustees come and go.

Because this special governance porridge has a constant flame under it, there's always something cooking. Thank you Goldilocks for showing us the way. ●

This is the second in a new series by Martin Farrell that looks in a light-hearted, but nevertheless serious way, at some of the more subtle issues facing trustee boards.



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