

Governance and all that jazz

It don't mean a thing (if it ain't got that swing). A group of jazz musicians can take studied risks to create something young, fresh and edgy, which has never been heard quite like that before. That's what jazz is all about – hearing the notes zing off the page

Think of jazz and, whether you're musically inclined or not, it's probably the ageing titans of the genre who come to mind. Somehow, with their maturing years, they've enriched their zing, not lost it.

I think there's something in this for the way we do governance. Yes – governance with swing. We (by which I mean those who are a couple of decades either side of me at 57) may have got into bad habits. We've got used to playing those governance tunes the same old monotonous way. No swing, no youthful edge, no zing.

Yes those habits have helped us cope with a harsh world. But they have also constrained us and drained us of the skill to approach each special challenge of governance with fresh eyes and ears.

Help is at hand. If we want to hear it, the jazz swing is all around us. If we listen, really listen, we may hear it from the lips of a person who is young in spirit on our board. Or from a spirited friend or younger relative. Or, if we are that way inclined, an even richer source of wisdom is our inner child (or perhaps even our inner delinquent?).

Then you may hear that having an agenda which has both rhythm and space, or laying out a meeting room which says 'you matter' when you walk in and experimenting with board papers that don't consume forests of paper, all help bring swing to your board meetings.

You may hear that most of us express ourselves more easily when we are part of smaller groups or sub-committees, that all of us like our achievements to be recognised and that all of us would prefer to be forgiven our mistakes.

You may be the youngest trustee ever of your organisation who can offer your fresh wisdom as a mentor to an older trustee who has the good sense to receive it. Or you may be a chair who respects everyone by hearing all voices equally, perhaps by the simple device of having everyone say something about themselves at the beginning of the meeting.



These may look like canny ways of encouraging more young people into governance. They are, and they are also ways of enticing a swing into governance and helping everyone put more in and get more out.

Bringing zing to governance does not demean it. Like the titans of jazz, we must master the disciplines and honour the rules of our craft, so that we meet our obligations as trustees. Let's uphold the necessary order and also be open to taking studied risks to create a style of governance that is fresh and edgy.

Then we can play, really play; and our board papers will zing off the page.

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



Martin Farrell
Chair, Time Banks UK
Founder and director
Get2thepoint
020 8404 8661
martin.farrell@
get2thepoint.org