

Hello, is there anybody there (body and soul)?

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.

Ten people around a table with spare agendas and sundry papers waiting neatly in the middle. Half full coffee cups, a few scattered biscuit wrappers, pens in hand and a few vacant chairs, poised hopefully for latecomers.

The scene is set for the board to go strategically where no charity has gone before.

But is anybody there – really there?

I spent part of my summer sitting with my eyes closed ... and breathing. And it set me thinking about how much of the time when we're busy, busy, busy with work, our attention, our spirit, is somewhere else. We're not there, or only partly so and the quality of our endeavours is the poorer for it.

So there we all are at the board table. Eyes open. Paying attention. The meeting starts. And off we go.

Indeed. Before too long, off we go into a space of random thoughts about our frustrating journey, the troubling mail we got this morning, the annoying thing someone just said. Body is there, but all our attention is not. Maybe we doodle, or maybe we're accomplished enough to maintain a convincing outward appearance of rapt attention.

Either way, let's pause, perhaps take a few quiet breaths and focus our attention back on ourselves and the room, and listen more fully to what others are saying. Breathe. Three times. See the body language, listen to what's said, to what's not said and listen to our responses before and as we make them.

Indeed, a smart chair might help everyone to arrive by starting the meeting asking everyone to reflect and then share what's going on for them, what they're bringing into the room, so they can leave it to one side for the next few hours.

Or if, during the meeting, collective attention is drifting out of the window, have a pause. Aaahhh, the power of the pause.

I don't see this as airy fairy psycho-babble but rather as a practical approach to helping



"I'm glad to see that we are all focussed on our meeting"

to neutralise inevitable inner distractions and to bring all our attention to bear on our endeavour.

So much for the soul stuff, now for the body bit. Those hopefully poised vacant chairs remained empty. Indeed those same trustees who are not there this time were not there last time, or the time before that. Not good enough.

We sign up as trustees to be there, body and soul. If the body is not here, the name should not be in the annual report either. No free rides. Three strikes and you're out. Keep a list and be firm with non-attenders.

Furthermore, those who are there – body and soul – also need to be there with the right papers, having read them and prepared with the points they want to make and questions to ask. Sounds so obvious doesn't it? But are you 100 per cent sure it happens 100 per cent of the time on your board? Any less isn't good enough. Expect more.

Does all this ring a bell? Hmmm. If so, take three (slow) breaths.

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