

# Does your authority figure come out to play?

**I never go out without him. He travels free, never really sleeps, is invisible but always present.**

*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.*

With me all day and all night, at work and at play, he pops up unannounced. This 'he' comes with an occasional hint of 'she' or of 'they'. But, being substantially a creation of my primary relationship with my dad, my take-everywhere authority figure is mainly a 'he'.

Have you got one? Yes, for sure and he/she/they are always ready to come out to play. That playing can get serious when you are given the authority of trusteeship and even more so when you are elevated to the dizzy heights of chair.

When your authority figure comes out to play, its time for all sorts of joys and sorrows – not to mention thrills, and occasional bloody noses or broken bones.

Imperfectly formed from our experiences of powerful adults in our formative years, our authority figures are a complex amalgam often lying dormant. But being on a board, with its legal authority and associated duties, inevitably provokes our inner world for all to see.

With some insight, we can choose when and how. As chair we can choose what tone and style for the board. And as a trustee we can choose how much we act out our projections on the chair and office holders.

But internal authority figures which remain unacknowledged, can create havoc. Maybe you have seen some of these?

You may have seen the pain caused to chief executives from a chair's authority wielded like a club hammer. I'm bigger than you, I'm the boss and you'd better do what I say.

You may have seen the muddle tumbling from a chair who actively favours one aspect of the organisation's mission over another – like favouring services for children over the same services for adults, even though both are within the mission.

Or the spin created by an absentee chair, too busy with his new day job, to answer the phone or respond to increasingly desperate mails from the chief executive.



*'Can your authority figure come out to play?'*

And last and by no means least you may have seen the disasters which unfold from the juxtaposition of a passive chair with a powerful trustee who assumes a leadership authority which is not his (as it generally is) to claim. A fundamental order, the need for which seems to be hardwired into us, is disrupted with devastating consequences.

That's the bad news. But of course there is an even greater abundance of good news which flows from the expression of authority, given or earned, which is healthy and productive. For example, you may know chairs who do this by expressing their inner authority figures which combine discipline and rigour with ease and cordiality – and infuse their boards with these qualities.

Whatever authority figures we have grown up with, we have a choice about how and when we ask them out into the world. And the better we know them the better choices we can make... about when to ask them out to play. ●

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