

Mind the gap

The uniformed lady had a microphone and (do I remember correctly?) a whistle and her voice could be heard by hundreds of rather blank-looking people who at the end of the day, were only half listening. But they nevertheless heeded her advice to ‘mind the gap’.

This was not the first time I had been amongst the heaving masses on London Transport but I saw it with fresh eyes. Because for the first time I was travelling free with my newly-acquired Freedom Pass having turned 60 just a few weeks before. Free at last!

By chance it was also the very day after we introduced our new chair to staff at Read International. All went well which, whilst not a surprise, was a relief. My role of minding the gap as interim chair for four months was coming to an end. Job (nearly) done.

Fresh eyes and the whiff of freedom set me thinking about the role of vice chair. Being on a board is an adventure in handling relationships up, down, and all around. Being bang in the middle of the dynamic, the role of vice chair often brings even more complexity to handle.

“I’m the vice chairman”



One way of looking at it I thought is that being on a board is one long series of conversations about making decisions which lead to actions which together achieve the mission. And in those conversations gaps inevitably appear from time to time – which need to be filled somehow. And that’s the job of the vice chair who functions as a minder of the gaps.

Along the way there might be big gaps and tricky conversations. Many years ago, in a previous vice chair role, it was my place to facilitate a formal conversation about a grievance, sent by a member of staff to the chair, about the chief executive. It was uncomfortable all round. But it was my job to take care of it.

There might be even more tricky conversations to be had if you’re a vice chair and you’ve overseen the appointment of an external candidate as chair and after the first few weeks there are noises of discontent... a yawning gap to be taken care of. Who knows there may even need to be some whistleblowing.

But most day-to-day gaps are not that challenging. There may be a discomfort to be held when other trustees have not given the same attention to a board paper which no doubt you have. You’re modelling good governance behaviour we all aspire to. Or you may fill an obvious gap at a board meeting when the chair’s chair is empty at short notice.

As I settle back into my day-to-day vice-chair role I think of the lady with the whistle. Like her I look all the way up and down the platform and all around me to see the gaps, make sure all are safe, heading in the right direction, and that the governance train can indeed leave the platform and happily carry on its way. ●

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