

Trustees go to the seaside

Drive too fast, you come off the road when you hit a bend. Drive too slow you're overtaken. Too many hands on the wheel, you'll be swerving all over the road. No drive at all, no go.

Note: The stories in this piece are all based on real situations. Although some may be eerily familiar, any resemblance to any board, chair, CE or staff team which may be near you, is purely coincidental.

Look around you. Do you know who's driving?

Gather up a bus full of trustees and take them to the seaside for the day and you'll hear many stories about who has their hands on the wheel and their feet on the controls in their organisation.

You may hear stories about the drive coming from a staff team which for too long had been allowed to get away with manoeuvring a passive board into submission and dispatching three chief executives (CEs) in a row. Until one day a new vice chair saw what was happening and resolved to stop the dangerous driving and backed the new CE and faced down the antagonists.

You may hear about the chair driving in a style and in the direction he (or she) chooses, with fellow trustees just following, entranced by his (or her) contacts, money and resources and personal authority. The CE is preoccupied with keeping the chair happy, whilst at the same time trying to get a hand on the wheel; and she knows she is spending too much time trying to convince the staff team that the bumpy ride is caused by potholes in the external environment, rather than a struggle over who is steering.

"Oh I do like to be beside the CE's side"



Then there's the board who knows that their ship has been on a slow cruise for far too long and decides things need to get going. They know this is their

responsibility, but also know that this large charity, like a super tanker, will take a while to change course. They are at the helm and turn the wheel but nothing much happens. It's not connected to the rudder and the tanker just ploughs on.

Eventually they manage to appoint a new CE and three years later, they begin to notice that policies and practice are slowly, but surely, heading for a new horizon. Most of them are still on board; and they smile. At last.

You may spot some behavioural clues which hint at who is driving whom in your organisation.

Who initiates and approves the agenda for meetings, do you have disputes over how hot topics are recorded in the minutes, whose word carries weight?

How many blind copy emails do you get inviting you into intrigue; does the sub-text you don't see have a greater impact on what happens than the text you do see? Is there a culture of gatherings of trustees and/or of staff members huddled away in private corners?

Maybe you'd like to pause to look around and collect up hints and clues about whose hands and feet are where in your organisational vehicle. Do you like what you see?

So that next time you find yourself with a bus full of trustees going to the seaside, you'll have your own driving story to share. ●

Martin Farrell
 Vice-chair, Read International
 Founder and director, get2thepoint
martin.farrell@get2thepoint.org