

Kicking the rabbit habit (don't mention the crisis)

Well it's only natural I guess. Rabbits do it, normal healthy people do it and trustees do it too.



Yes you guessed it. Dazzled by the light shining in their eyes, rabbits are well known for their habit of being frozen into inactivity. Pain and destruction is heading their way but they do not move.

I've seen this rabbit habit in the way boards respond to threat. The bright dazzling lights may be the sudden realisation that there is less money around than was imagined or some other threat which endangers the existence of the charity.

"She'll have to produce a rabbit from a hat to solve this one"

There's nothing quite like the fear of impending doom to stop us in our tracks. Being stopped in our tracks means we do not react as rational beings. Racing pulse and a rising feeling of panic does something weird to our capacity to be calm and rational and see things as they really are. Our brains go into something of a scramble.

We might spend our time on unproductive fearful conversations with those on the board we feel a bit more comfortable with to try to reassure

ourselves that things are not quite as bad as they seem. We park difficult e-mails to be looked at later and 'later' doesn't come for a long while; we are slow to return calls from our chief executive.

But now is the time to be focused and use all our skills to take steady action which is focused on facing the fear, employing the best of our human faculties. Unlike rabbits which scatter and run in all directions, now is the time for acting thoughtfully and carefully and together. There is so much to do, let's go slowly.

This is a time for leaders to lead. Chair and vice chair must speak as one and be and be seen to be in charge – maybe structure a weekly catch-up call. And to be in charge now, because time is short and the impact of decisions taken now will take some while to see the light of day.

It's a time for a small group of trustees to fix conference calls or whatever is the quickest and cheapest way to meet together – and at the end of each call to capture next actions in a simple e-mail and fix the next one.

It's time to communicate what is happening in words which convey the truth whilst also being grounded so that fear is not provoked in others. This is neither a time for gloss and spin nor for talk of 'crisis' and 'emergency'. It's time to calmly speak the truth and steady the ship.

And most of all it's time to hold true to the vision which we as trustees hold in trust. Each decision we take will take us a step closer to securing the future for those who benefit from our trusteeship.

It's time to know that although we have various rabbit-like tendencies, when push comes to shove, we are smarter than they are (my apologies to rabbit-lovers) and can dig ourselves out of a hole when we need to. ●

Martin Farrell

Vice chair READ International
Founder and director, get2thepoint
martin.farrell@get2thepoint.org