

# Do you hear that voice – of the thief of time?

Once upon a time my friend's father offered some sage advice about how important it is to make decisions.

Can you hear his soft Yorkshire accent? An engineer, his advice was straightforward: get as much information as you need and as you can and then get on and make a decision. Plain and simple. Then he grandly announced that a third of decisions are right, a third are wrong – and the other third don't make any b... difference either way. So get on with it.

The fact that he had spent his life running a successful engineering company producing heavy-duty widgets, does not set him apart from the endeavours we are engaged in as trustees. He was producing stuff and so are we.

Very often, a significant ingredient of the crises which propels chief executives to pick up the phone and call the Acevo<sup>1</sup> crisis coaching service has been procrastination. Boards that is, who procrastinate.

Having manoeuvred themselves, more or less (mostly the latter) consciously, into a hot spot, they react – by not reacting. And that lack of decisiveness, itself, breathes an inflammable vapour over the hot coals and hey presto before you know it, you're in a fire-storm.

Here's a true (anonymous) story. An allegation of all sorts of bad behaviour by the chief executive (CE) sent to the board and all and sundry by a disgruntled volunteer one day at 2.35am elicits no response, not the next day, not for the next month. The thief of time whispers '*do nothing, it'll probably go away*'. Do you hear that voice? In a context of a looming funding crisis the CE is incapacitated – and somewhat distressed to say the least.

Eventually there is an investigatory hearing, but lo and behold no action is taken to report back or to decide what action, if any, to take. Six months later, after the fire has spread (trustees resigned, CE off sick, funders disgruntled), the remaining trustees finally produce a letter saying there is no case to answer. But the damage was done. The board could have fulfilled its duty so much better, just by taking timely action.

Here's how it could have been different: a swift acknowledgment, a quick but thorough look

into the allegations, recommendations made and a board decision taken; inform those who need to know of the outcome and clear up the emotional or other debris.

And here's another real-life story: a chair is exhibiting erratic behaviour, not following up actions and is absent. It's as if the trustees have all had that whisper of the thief of time in their ear who tells them that it's a personal matter and best not to say anything. And so, by default, they do not decide anything. So the slow-burn distress on the CE eats away at his resolve, he loses sleep and struggles to carry on...somehow he does and the tide of events does eventually start to turn, but only when a high personal and organisational price has been paid.

Do you hear that voice...the voice of the thief of time? It's time to decline the invitation and take action. Now. And for good. ●

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<sup>1</sup> Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations