

All ready to go...

Everyone turns up happy and are ready to go...to sleep.

It is a sweet dreamy sleep with hazy images of even greater things to come and all happy thoughts somewhere up there in the ether. Words of determination, conviction and passion swim around the board table and all are drugged into a blissful contentment.

Plaudits are showered on the charity, and trustees know that their chief executive (CE) is capable, convincing and covers in detail everything that needs to be covered in detail. Everyone knows that the future is in good hands. A warm glow pervades.

No problem. Or is there?

Is it possible for a CE to be just too good at her or his job? Surely oodles of dynamism, self-belief and energy is what all boards want – and the more the merrier.

Well yes sort of, but there's a price to pay for having a massively competent CE with lots of passion and conviction. The price is that trustees can find themselves being lulled to sleep, believing all they're told.

It's not that the CE is lying or doing a cover-up, but rather that she has some kind of forcefield within the orbit of which all are somewhat spellbound. Being around Steve Jobs, founder of Apple, was said to be like that. You were sure it would take six months to launch that new

product but in his presence you magically become convinced you could do it in six weeks.

But we know that as trustees we must be ever-watchful. At the end of the day it's our duty to be sure what is happening beyond the convincing words – at the end of the quarter we must be confident that we know how much money is coming and going and at the end of the year we must know how far we've delivered the mission.

We know that at the end of our CE's tenure all sorts of things will come to light. Our chickens will (wake from their sleep and) come home to roost.

I'm not suggesting that you'll find really bad criminal things – that would be pretty unusual. But I'm pretty sure that your new CE will take a fresh look and see things differently. (A bit like the builder who turns up and takes one look at the wall: 'Hmm, who did that for you?')

So if you are blessed with a wonderful and convincing CE it's best to take a swig of the anti-forcefield potion called 'scrutiny' before each meeting. Celebrate your CE's abilities and know your duty too.

Also have the courage to support fellow trustees who speak up and question (which reminds me of being on the board of a highly successful sixth form college some years ago and felt critical 'you're not being one of us' eyes bearing down on me each time I asked the head a question).

Do that and there will be every chance of being ready and knowing the truth and not too much chance of being ready to go to sleep...every chance of being ready... ●

Martin Farrell
Chair, Read International
martin.farrell@get2thepoint.org

