**Transforming Governance: Leading and Overseeing Strategy – 13 December 2023**

MICHELLE WRIGHT:

Good afternoon and welcome.

I'm Michelle Wright.

I run an organisation called Cause4.

For the purposes of the tape, I'm a white woman in my

40s, with dark brown hair and I'm wearing a dark grey

jumper.

Just a couple of bits of housekeeping.

We're going to have cameras off until the break-out

session.

So there will be a chance for you to work in groups on

a particular issue at which point it will be wonderful

if you were able to have cameras on.

The chat function is disabled, but the Q and A, the

question and answer function is on.

If you have questions, thoughts, that you'd like to pop

into that section, that would be wonderful.

We are going to answer all questions and circulate them

after the session with the slides.

So, we'll get started on this particular module which

is leading and overseeing strategy.

We've got 40 to 50 minutes of content.

There will be a short break.

Then a chance for you to work together in groups, and

then we also have a guest speaker at the end of the

session.

So leading and overseeing strategy. There are a number

of areas that I'm going to cover and to think about.

The board's role in shaping organisational vision,

mission and values.

Working with staff and volunteers to help shape

strategy, how do we go about it?

What shall we be thinking of?

Approaches to strategic planning and decision-making

for trustees, where do we put our energy?

Where do we put our efforts?

What best makes a difference?

Then to think about the hardest part in my view, of

trustees role in strategy which is about the

implementation and monitoring of the business plan.

Often, we can have a great strategy, a great business

plan, but really as trustees, how do we know we're on

the right path?

How do we know it is going to be successful?

Then to think about our wider role on future

sustainability and monitoring the risk to that.

Of course, we need to protect our organisations right

now.

We need to meet our short-term requirements, but as

trustees, we also have a responsibility for long-term

sustainability, for thinking 10 to 15 years from now,

50 years from now, so how do we do that effectively?

I'm going to start with vision, mission and values and

probably many of you will be groaning already!

We hear a lot about vision, mission and values, but

really, as trustees, these are one of our key tools

that does quite an important job of gluing a number of

our responsibilities together.

As trustees, we are responsible for the founding

governing government, are we being true to it?

Are we delivering its principles?

As charitable trustees, we're also responsible for

making sure we're delivering public benefit.

Are our activities reaching a good proportion of the

public?

Are they meeting our expectations?

Around public benefit?

We're also tasked with making sure that the

organisation is sustainable into the future.

So, we have an odd mix of guardianship, custodial

roles, public benefit, what's happening now and future

sustainability and the vision, mission and values are a

great binding document, set of documents and principles

which marry those three areas together.

I talk to lots of Chief Executives during Covid.

Some were saying, "Where do we start?

Where do we put our energies?

Where should our priorities be?"

A number went straight back to vision, mission and

values. Often this is an exercise that's not done

brilliantly.

It can feel very samey.

As trustees, at least once a year we should be looking

to refresh and to make sure that the communications are

as strong as possible.

That they are distinctive and allow our organisation to

stand out against another.

They're also, of course, really important in making

sure that the organisation feels bought into a set of

values.

A really strong purpose that we know what we're working

towards.

We can make decisions as to what we do and what we

decide not to do as we go forward in our strategic

decisions.

So, our vision statement will set our ideal state of

the charity into the future.

Our mission statement will work out and tell us what

we're doing and how we're going to do it.

Our values will obviously set the principles of how we

want to work, the tone of how we work, and how we work

together and support each other.

There is so much in the values, I think, that

links into the culture of the organisation.

What are we trying to achieve?

How are we operating?

How does it feel to work here?

How is the board operating?

Is the board being helpful?

And supportive to the development of strategy?

I think often we forget about the culture of the board

and its importance in terms of how we set strategic

direction.

It is not going to work if we've got a very ambitious

business plan that we want to deliver in a short space

of time if the culture of the organisation is going to

be resistant to that change.

If the board isn't set-up to be able to support the

organisation to move that strategy forward. Quite often

organisations can have incredible strategies, but

they've missed thinking about the culture.

They've missed thinking about what is really practical

in terms of the speed that an organisation can deliver

that strategy.

So thinking about values in terms of the culture of the

board, I think, can be really important.

So, as we think about vision, mission and values, we

should have a moment to reflect on whether they are fit

for purpose, whether they are true to that founding

document and whether they meet public benefit and

whether they set an ambitious goal towards

sustainability.

This is for trustees to really take responsibility for,

I think often trustees feel dragged along on vision,

mission and values, but they are the key document which

marries the three areas which are our responsibilities

together.

Obviously, strategy is a plan. Sometimes there can be

anxiety about business, planning and strategy.

Sometimes to the term " Business plan" can be something

which causes anxiety in organisations.

We're thinking about how we're going to get

from A to B.

What's needed in this next period?

How are we going to get there?

How are we going to get there most efficiently?

So we're thinking about how we're supporting the

organisation to secure its future. It is a document

that is something that trustees, staff and volunteers

can work towards, engaging with making sure that we're

responding to what is happening in the external

environment as well as doing the things that are

important to our organisation, founding document and

what our beneficiaries and communities most need right

now.

It is a great document for working out where our skills

are, where the gaps are, on the board, I have seen many

charities at the moment recruit boards to deliver the

period of the business plan or strategy.

I think it is an incredibly smart approach.

We'll think we need a finance person and a legal

person, a communications person, etcetera.

Of course, we need all those things often, but what we

really need in terms of thinking about the skills

make-up of our board, is the skills to deliver the next

period of our plan.

I think it is an incredibly motivating thing for

trustees to come in for the period of a plan knowing

that they're bringing a key skill that can support that

organisation to deliver part of that plan.

We've also got to think about the external environment.

One of the critical things we bring as trustees and

almost the point of trusteeship is that we bring that

experience of what's happening externally.

Anybody that works internal to an organisation will

know how easy it is to get into the detail, to get into

the weeds of what is happening.

As trustees, we have that dispassionate role, that

independent role to be bringing our experience of

what's happening in the external environment, to really

be able to support organisations in terms of really

focusing on what's important and what's not in terms of

what's happening externally.

Prioritisation though is probably the number one thing

that trustees can help with in terms of effective

business planning and strategy.

What are our priorities?

Why are they important now?

How are we going to use the limited resources we have

to most effectively deliver on what needs to be done?

Covid, in a way, has been incredibly helpful, I think,

in being able to focus organisations in particular

areas.

We've had to.

We can't operate in the way that we previously did.

We didn't have the resources to be able to operate in

the way that we previously did and it has been a great

kind of reflective moment, if we think about it

positively, to be really focusing on what do our

communities most need now?

What do our beneficiaries need?

What should we be really focusing on and what should we

pause doing?

Because actually, it is important, but not for right

now and what might we need to stop?

In my experience, charitable organisations are not very

good sometimes in really being able to make sense of

prioritisation.

We know what needs to be delivered.

We feel strongly and passionately about what needs to

be delivered.

In our artistic programme, in our heritage support, but

we don't often have the same mechanisms that are there

in the private sector for really determining

prioritisation.

We don't have ruthless programmes to get rid of the 20%

or 30% of least performing things or things which are

not priorities for our audiences or customers or

consumers right now. Everything can feel important.

We can get into cycles where resources are obviously

critically important, but it can be very hard

internally to decide where to focus.

So trustees can really help, again, with that external,

dispassionate overview in determining how we apply

resources.

What should we be doing right now?

What should we pause?

What do we need to stop so we can create space to focus

in new and different areas?

Then, of course, we've got the time scale that we need

to work to.

Usually the business plan will be three to five years.

So much of our time at the moment for obvious reasons

in terms of the economic pressures that we're facing is

focused on the short-term.

What's happening right now.

Are we going to get, are we going to meet the budget

for this year?

How are we going to determine resources for the next

year?

But as trustees, the Charity Commission very firmly

puts responsibility on to us for future sustainability.

So that's long-term.

It can be really helpful to have two or three trustees

which are tasked thinking 10 or 15 years from now, 50

years from now.

A lot of our audience strategies are geared towards

what our communities need now, but we only have to look

at what is happening in the census for example, that's

just started to come out to recognise how quickly our

communities are changing.

You know, we need to be thinking ahead, have some

elements of our business plan and thinking ahead to

what our audiences will look like and need in 50 years

from now, not just in the immediate time and making

sure the business plan and strategy is a living part of

board meetings. It is not something that's created

because we've got to meet the needs of funders,

although, of course, that will clearly be part of what

we need to do.

We've got a way or mechanism to embed the strategy.

That we've got a way to monitor and review.

That it becomes part of our response as a board to

gather around that strategy and that business plan.

Who leads?

Trustees or executive is a key question.

If we look at it from a Charity Commission perspective,

then the Charity Commission will firmly say and firmly

says that trustees need to take responsibility for the

strategic direction of the organisation.

So, the ball is in our court in terms of setting the

direction, setting the strategy in terms of the coming

years.

Often, we find executive-led processes though.

Staff teams understand the work, they're delivering the

work.

They understand the communities and the audiences.

They may have a key deadline for a funder where a

funder wants to refresh or development of the business

plan.

There is no right nor wrong in terms of how strategy is

devised, but trustees definitely need to lead the

process of determining how strategy is going to be

devised.

So if we're going to delegate that process to

executive, then we need to, as trustees, make sure that

we've got sufficient time to input.

That we've got sufficient time to challenge the

strategy.

That we understand where we're going to be able to see

and review it.

If we're going to co-create strategy, if we're going to

work together, which is obviously the ideal, then

again, we need to understand our process.

We need to understand the timescale.

We need to understand when trustees will have proper

time to input and review. Often co-creation of strategy

isn't done effectively because it takes more time for

boards to operate in that way even though ultimately

the output will likely be better if we've worked on

developing something together.

Having strategy as part of our board meetings can be

difficult because there is so much to consider.

This piece of research from governance, I really like

because it allows us time to think about strategy and

to properly review strategy.

This research says there are three modes which boards

operate in.

The first is what they call operational mode, this is

our compliance.

This is all the things that we have to do as

responsibilities of the Charity Commission and other

funders.

There is then a strategic mode.

This is about really thinking about the strategy for

the organisation. Helping to develop the strategy for

the organisation.

The third area is what they call expressive mode.

So this is where, as trustees, we think about what

we're going to pay attention to.

What's important.

What are we going to ask the staff team to report on,

but we're not going to be so focused on.

What are the four or five areas of critical importance

to the success of this business plan?

What impact do we want to have?

Very broadly, when I'm chairing organisations or

working with chairs of organisations, we think about

this because I think if you can broadly structure

meetings so that they're roughly a third, a third, a

third then we start to have proper space and time to

actually consider strategy.

This piece of research says that 90% of charitable

organisations never get out of the first box, the

compliance box.

So, we sit as trustees in meetings where we're going

through very important areas, but actually we never

have chance to properly discuss and consider strategy.

If you're there as somebody whose skills set is in

business planning and strategy, this can also be very,

very frustrating and leads to lack of engagement of

boards.

So, structure of the meetings is really important

because then we start to really pay attention to what

we think as a board is important.

I am just working with a group of organisations this

morning where the board members were saying, "Well, our

meetings are two hours long.

A lot of that is hearing from the Chief Executive

artistic director about the work that's happened."

There is value to that, but that's not governance nor

setting strategic direction.

We've got to determine how we're going to spend our

time in the meetings as a group of trustees and what

we're particularly going to pay attention to.

Just thinking briefly on process.

If as board members we really take responsibility for

gripping how we're going to device strategy, how the

organisation is going to go about it then we obviously

need to be mindful of who is going to be part of a team

in developing strategy, when that strategy is going to

come back to the board for consideration.

We need to be thinking long-term as well as short-term.

So how are we thinking about what happens in 10, 15, 20

years time?

We need to make sure that there is commitment from

people across the organisation and some free

conversation.

One of the challenges, of course, though is that if we

open up the strategic conversation widely across an

organisation, if people are asked to contribute ideas

then people will get very frustrated if they don't see

the ideas realised so we need time to consider what's

going in now, what might be for the future and which

ideas perhaps aren't going to go forward, but we need

to provide some explanation as to why.

The execution is important.

As we talked about in terms of culture, you know, there

is no point having a very credible business plan that

works to a particular time scale if culturally the

organisation isn't ready to move at that speed.

The plan needs to be actionable.

We need to clearly see how we can get from A to B and

the steps to do that.

It needs to be flexible.

Obviously, we're working in such a fast changing

environment at the moment that we're going to need to

adapt and change plans quickly.

We need clear steps after each particular discussion

and a proper timeline and it needs to be a habit, not

something that we do as we're respond to go a funder's

deadline, or those sorts of pressures.

Business plans or strategies that are written by

particular departments or teams or scatter gunned

across an organisation are usually not particularly

successful.

So, having one author, one voice that brings a strategy

together can be really useful.

The expectation and timetable that we set, again very

important.

We want some review.

Three or four people that we trust external to the

organisation, partners, people that can give us input,

fresh ideas and thinking and will just spot things

which may have been missed.

There will be time for re-draft and circulation for

approval.

There is a lot to it which is why co-creation of

strategy sometimes practically isn't done particularly

well because of the time it takes from board and staff.

So, there is obviously lots to the development of

strategy. Lots for trustees to think about. But there

are really five things which certainly in my work as a

trustee that I try and pay particular attention to.

The first is how we're going to do it as already

mentioned.

Trustees need to determine how the process of

developing a strategy is going to be done.

Is it going to be a staff-driven process where the

trustees have input?

Is it going to be something that's co created?

The second area, as already mentioned, is that external

environment piece.

What's happening externally that's really going to

input and impact our organisation.

At the moment, there are so many things that we're

having to consider, you know, post-Covid, cost of

living crisis, more competition for funds, difficulties

in audience behaviour, post-Covid, all these things are

things that organisation are having to think about and

juggle.

For trustees, if we can bring that external view in a

calm way, what exactly is going to impact our

organisation in this next period?

What is the biggest priority?

What is there as something that is of concern like

Brexit for example, but in our particular context,

doesn't affect us directly.

I say this because often in this part of strategy, it

can feel like a brain dump on everything that we're

thinking of, everything that we're concerned about.

For trustees, one of the most helpful, brilliant things

that we can bring is some prioritisation of some of

these external drivers.

Some of the things which are happening in the external

environment.

How exactly are they going to impact our organisation

and what should we just discard because actually, it is

important, but not critical in our particular context.

Again, in the external environment, there will be

different areas.

Different things in terms of the political situation or

the economic situation that directly impact our

organisation.

Some that will not be so important.

Some that we will be keeping a watching brief on.

Some which we don't have resources like AAI to be able

to take advantage of right now.

So again, this is part of the same aspect as trustees,

how do we prioritise, how do we support an organisation

to be thinking about how it applies its resources?

What must we pause or stop doing so we can create space

to respond?

We surely can't keep adding activities and adding more

responsibilities and adding more areas of strategic

focus because we simply don't have the resources

available to be able to address them.

Thinking about the analysis again is my third point for

trustees particularly to pay attention to on strategy.

Because we've got so many competing demands, because

we've got so many difficulties in terms of thinking

about the pressures that we're facing as arts

organisations and cultural organisations at the moment,

it can be that we have long, long lists of

opportunities and threats.

We have long lists of strengths and weaknesses.

That's not going to be helpful to us in making any

strategic decisions.

The analysis which we usually put together, strengths

and weaknesses and things in the external environment

that are outside of our control.

We don't want more than four or five things in each of

those boxes.

Again, we have got a prioritisation exercise to do in

terms of what is most important now.

What's most important?

What is going to be a key driver for our organisation

going forward?

What's the key threat or vulnerability to our

organisation going forward?

How are we going to marry that in terms of the funding

and resources that we have available?

For trustees to focus on the analysis of the section

to make sure it is as tight and controlled as possible

gives us a chance to make sense of the strategic

opportunities that we have. It is done as a tick box

exercise rather than as something that can really

support an organisation to make meaningful decisions

about its next steps.

Then we've got the area where I started with vision,

mission and values.

So, how do we marry together that principle of being

true to the founding document, meeting public benefit

and future sustainabilities?

We want to make sure that we've got a really strong

sense of what we should be focusing on and what might

be appropriate, but is not for now and definitely to

avoid, where we can, chasing money or mission drift or

areas that are not critical to our core purpose.

Most successful organisations build their capacity and

their resilience by focusing on what they're already

doing really well.

Most organisations run into difficulties because

they're under pressure or when times are tough, they

diversify too quickly into new areas.

If you study or look at the research into successful

companies, businesses, start-up organisations, it is

because they spend 90% of their time getting better at

what they already do.

They're very careful not to diversify or move into too

many new areas.

Certainly not too quickly.

As trustees, we can really hold that line.

We can support organisations to make sure that the core

focus and what will build our communications and

reputation and resilience with funders is about getting

better at what we already do well.

This comes back down to our prioritisation of

resources, activities and the implementation where

trustees can make such an amazing difference on the

ability of the strategic plan to be successful.

Fill in the details sounds so obvious, doesn't it?

But we as trustees have to be confident that there is

enough detail in this plan that it can be successfully

delivered. Often through the demands of funders, we end

up with business plans that are much longer, with more

narrative than is effectively useful within the

organisation.

As trustees, we need to determine what the length looks

like and the level of detail.

It needs to be something in the middle so it is a

workable document that everybody can refer to, that's

useful within the organisation.

Obviously, we need to be clear on who has authority to

act, who is doing particular parts of the plan, when it

is going to be reviewed, what the timeline is and how

we're going to refer to it in meetings.

Then there is the review of the plan.

This kind of sort of sounds so obvious, but as a

trustee, I've been in the situation a number of times

where I feel that the plan is good.

Where there has been a great process to create it,

where it feels as if the implementation is perfectly

achievable, but then if you ask trustees, are you on

the right path?

How do you know it is going to be successful?

It is much more difficult to answer.

Of course, we will have things like goals and

objectives or key performance indicators and those will

be clearly articulated, but they're often not

particularly helpful for review at board meetings.

Sometimes you can find that conversations on strategy

at board meetings has a very low level of engagement

and very low level of decent conversation actually from

trustees.

When that happens, it is usually in my experience, an

indicator that the board as a whole hasn't decided what

it is going to pay attention to.

We can't monitor the whole plan very effectively as

trustees who meet four to six times a year.

We need to determine as a board and decide what four or

five areas are critically important to the success of

the plan in the next period and it will change.

Right now, it might be that as a board, we are very

concerned because we know that we've got a succession

issue because the Chief Executive is leaving.

So that might be one area that we think about or we

look at.

It might be that we're incredibly concerned because our

reserve's position is non-existent so we've got a

financial vulnerability.

It might be as a board, we've got some key skills gaps

and some areas that are not fulfilled or some areas

where we know we're vulnerable in terms of reporting to

the Charity Commission. Everybody board will be

different. Those four or five things will change.

Sometimes they'll change very quickly. Sometimes they

might change over the period of a year, but if we as a

board have spent some time deciding what those things

are, we change the level of conversation and engagement

at board meetings because suddenly all trustees know

exactly what they're paying attention to.

So we start to ask for papers in those areas.

We start to really develop ideas in those areas.

We ask trustees to be prepared to answer questions in

those areas before meetings.

If a chair is saying, "We're going to pay particular

attention to succession planning."

Then trustees are coming to the meeting equipped to

talk about succession planning.

In my experience, just this exercise of board paying

attention and allowing a staff team to report on the

other areas can transform that dialogue and engagement

at meetings.

It might be that we're asking another charity or

organisation similar to ours that's been through a

particular, similar experience that we want to explore

to come and talk to us.

To talk to the board about what they did, what

challenges they faced.

It moves us out of that box of compliance into a more

meaningful debate around strategy.

So we need to be able to ask as board members how do we

know if we're being successful?

One measure will be hopefully we've had a discussion to

decide what we're paying attention to in the next

period.

The other area will be around what impact do we want to

have?

So, as we go through a strategic process as board, this

is a really kind of important question, how do we know

if we're being successful?

The plan looks great.

It looks credible on paper, but how do we actually know

whether we're on the right path?

If we're not on the right path, how are we going to

adapt and change?

What's the process for doing that?

We can only decide that through board-only discussion.

This is our responsibility.

The Charity Commission gives us as board members the

responsibility for setting strategic direction of the

organisation.

So, we need to be able to respond and change.

There is then an issue on conflict and what's known as

healthy challenge.

This comes back to the culture of boards as well.

We can run into difficulties if we have too much

challenge and conflict on boards because there is never

any safe space to really discuss what needs to happen.

We can similarly run into challenge if the board is too

collegiate, if it is too friendly, if it is too polite.

Penelope Gibbs talks about this.

What does healthy challenge look like?

What's useful right now?

What are the executive team looking for?

There is a disconnect in that specific point of

conversation.

So, executive teams can be very fed-up with boards,

saying they don't contribute.

They're not engaged enough and boards are quite

frustrated also with executive teams saying,

"We want to contribute, but we don't know how."

Thinking about a healthy challenge, what does it look

like?

How do we get that balance right in pushing forward a

strategy and challenging a strategy whilst making sure

that the strategy can be delivered.

We need to do it through obviously discussion and we

need to make sure that in the chair role, with the

Chief Executive, that that conversation is a regular

conversation.

What does healthy challenge look like right now?

What do the staff team need?

What best support account board give to help develop

this bit of strategy or its activities in this next

period?

So, I think it is quite useful sometimes to think of

traditional business model examples.

There is the infamous Tuckman that we see around team

dynamics. Boards are teams.

A board is going to be in a particular part this model

at a particular time.

So if we have a number of new trustees, we will be in

the forming stage.

It might be quite stormy because we've got new people,

new personalities.

There is a norming and performing stage.

As chairs, as fellow trustees, we need to be very

comfortable with conflict, with this healthy challenge

and to recognise that as a board develops, as new

people join, as people leave, that we will starting to

through different stages of this cycle.

At an organisational level, on strategy, I think it is

also useful to reflect on where the organisation is in

its life cycle.

I really like this model from Greiner and there are

really positive stages of growth.

He talks about the creative stage, a more directive

stage, a stage where we delegate to others, a stage for

co-ordination and collaboration. But each of these

stages, in this model, also gives way to crisis phases

and we're facing some of that right now, aren't we,

within our organisation.

So we may have a phase of revolution that's about

leadership, one around autonomy, control, because as

organisations grow and develop, they start to put in

more process and bureaucracy and red tape.

This last point, which I think is really relevant to

boards, as much as employees, is that there is a

psychological saturation of employees who grow

emotionally and physically exhausted from the intensity

of teamwork and the heavy pressure for innovative

solutions.

I think our organisations quite often in this stage

right now because we're facing so many competing

demands. Boards, if an organisation is facing financial

pressures, can grow very tired.

Psychologically drained.

We need to recognise this.

This is why it is some refreshment of boards and people

standing down at their term and bringing new people in

can be so important.

Because boards are like any teams, we want to retain as

much knowledge as we can, whilst bringing in fresh

energy and skills.

For organisations in crisis, there are a few points

from our umbrella body for the charity sector, the NCVO

which are useful to consider.

How are we going to explore risks, explore different

scenarios?

Hopefully not, but some of our organisations will face

very real threats to close.

Some will need to think about partnership or

collaboration or merger with other organisations. These

are trustee responsibilities.

We're the runs that are tasked with future

sustainability and ongoing solvency.

So we need to have space for these discussions to

explore the relevant scenarios.

We need to do it at the relevant speed.

If financial pressures are a particular concern, what

speed do we need to respond in terms of exploring

solutions and particular different scenarios.

How are we going to manage the risks?

Who is going to have the authority to have particular

conversations or do particular activities?

What's the decision-making process?

Will it need to change because we're facing a

particular crisis?

How are we going to re-focus our efforts in line with

our charitable purpose because as trustees that's what

we need to hold on to, that founding governing document

and core purpose.

How effective or essential are the core services?

Again, in prioritisation, what is most important right

now?

What could we pause and what might do we need to stop

doing. Who could we partner with to offer new services

or support?

What flexibility to our employees and volunteers and

beneficiaries?

What immediate actions do we need to take to manage our

finances, cashflow and contingency costs.

I was talking to a chair for a theatre company facing

some financial difficulties. She was saying that

trustees are aware of the financial challenges, but in

the board meetings, staff are there.

She felt they never had a kind of urgent conversation

about the financial pressures that the organisation was

facing.

As board members, we need to grip that and have

board-only discussion about some of those scenario

planning, bringing in staff teams in thinking about

future purpose and direction.

Can we speak to funders about the impact of cancelling

or delaying activities or repurposing funds?

This is an area of real concern from a lot of

organisations at the moment with the particular

pressures that we're facing as organisations.

Some of those activities, areas that we promised to

deliver might not be able to be delivered in exactly

the same way as intended.

We need, again, as trustees to be really supportive to

talk to funders and to think about repurposing funds.

Funders are going to be much more minded to support

organisations to sustainability even though there is so

much fear about talking about a funder with that worry

that you won't be re-funded.

From my perspective, the funders I work to and talk to,

they will be open to the repurposing of funds just as

they were in Covid.

How can we use technology to make particular decisions

and how are we going to meet our compliance deadlines

in terms of particular decision-making?

So our most famous definition of sustainable

development, if we're thinking about that future role

for our charities, development that meets the need of

the present without compromising the ability of future

generations.

We need to maximise our activities right now for our

beneficiaries in the urgent areas where they need it,

but we need to protect our organisation into the

future.

Or make difficult decision around merger or partnership

etcetera.

Sustainability, it is a really pressing issue.

Financial sustainability, number one challenge for

charity leaders. Lots of organisations obviously in the

charity sector facing real fears on financial and

funding sustainability.

But just some final thoughts on this.

We've got a core role and a key role as charitable

trustees to be supporting organisations to be effective

and to think effectively about sustainability, but our

structure of board meetings is often not particularly

helpful to be able to do this very well.

So, we need some time to reflect and learn from the

past. Often we join boards as trustees and we're not

given anything that talks about what's happened in the

past, what worked, what didn't.

I joined a board that had taken on a number of

government contracts to deliver.

They'd all failed. It was the wrong charity to deliver

that sort of work, but as four or five new board

members joined, I thought we could be doing the same

thing because there is nothing written down which talks

about what happened in the past. Whilst I'm not

advocating for reams of information, but having some

headlines on strategy for next generation of board

members can be really, really helpful.

Other things that we want to make sure our annual

report tells a true picture.

I think there is obviously a human nature aspect of

wanting to tell a great story. But most funders

certainly the general public are looking for a true

picture.

Most organisations are facing challenges at the moment.

Most organisations will have strategies which had

to be repurposed and redeveloped to the picture we're

in.

We need to make sure that which partnerships are having

value.

We need to measure capacity and demand.

We need to be thinking about succession planning, for

keyboard roles and for executive roles.

Diversify our funding dreams, but not over-diversify.

We hear so much about diversifying our income streams,

but most successful charities put effort into

developing depth in two or three areas.

Not in over-stretching in five or six.

Obviously be proactive in financial issues because as

trustees, we hold that important line on solvency. To

be looking ahead, to be efficient and really important,

as a final thing, is to be very mindful of this balance

between pushing forward as an organisation, and having

some moments of lull and reflection.

So many of our charitable organisations are at full

tilt all the time.

Our resources are so stretched.

We're surviving into the next period of our business

plan on making sure that we meet targets.

Obviously, that's not an area for a sustainable

position

nor does it meet our requirements as trustees in terms

of safeguarding because we've got a duty of care for

everyone who comes into contact with our organisation

including our staff and volunteers.

In our strategy, this is where our prioritisation

becomes so important.

We need times where we're pushing forward and driving

and times where there is some reflection and support.

So that will undoubtedly mean stopping doing some

things and pausing other things and making sure that

we're really clear on what the most important

activities are right now and for what reason.

Great.

I'm going to stop there.

Bang on time.

We've got a 10 minute break now.

We will be back to reflect on some of this in the

break-out.

We will see everyone at 3:00pm.

BREAK

MICHELLE WRIGHT:

Welcome back everyone.

We're going to have a chance to work together more

about 15 minutes or so.

The question which will be in the chat in your rooms is

how is your strategy devised within your organisation?

Be the charitable structure or any type of organisation

and who is involved?

How could the process be improved to develop the

strategic overview of your organisation?

And for each group, if one person could type up two or

three points, that would be wonderful and pop them

afterwards in the Q and A section of the Zoom and we

will circulate them with the notes and slides so that

you can see an overview of what each group have said.

You should now get a link to the break-out rooms and we

will see you shortly.

BREAKOUT SESSIONS

MICHELLE WRIGHT:

I'm delighted that we've got our guest

speaker, Sri Sarker.

SRI SARKER:

Hello everybody. Thank you Cause4.

I will be with you more about 15 minutes.

Just to give you an outline of the day.

And to introduce myself.

I'm an Indian woman with her hair in a bun, wearing

glasses in a green office.

I'm going to be talking to you for the next 15 minutes

along these lines.

I'm going to start with an introduction to myself.

Give you more context to my working career to date.

We're going to move on to what I'm calling the

foundations of strategic thinking.

Then we will move our attention to working with staff

and how to get the best out of the team around you when

thinking about strategic planning.

Finally, I'm going to turn our attention to working

with trustees, bringing them into the process so they

can be part of a collaborative design of strategic

thinking. Moving on to me.

This is a small collection of organisations I have

worked for or with in both a staff and a trustee

capacity.

All my career and roles to date have required me to

listen, design, implement, evaluate and refine on

behalf of the organisation.

Most often I'm invited into organisations to provide an

objective viewpoint to discern direction and help see

what's working and what's not working. Often I'm there

to lift the organisation out of the operational and

move them towards more strategic thinking.

So this is just a collection of organisations I have

done that with or I am a trustee with.

So moving on to strategic thinking and the building

blocks of strategic thinking.

The first thing that I wanted to address was the

misunderstanding I'm often confronted with, with

organisations who equate strategy with growth.

Strategy isn't always about growth, but it is always

about clarity.

So, it is really important for us to always think about

adopting a strategic approach in all our work.

Applying a strategic approach can be about stopping or

closing an area of work or our organisation in a

considered and measured way.

I say to anybody I'm working with, we are not here to

necessarily grow or scale up as the only answer and as

the only application as strategic thinking.

A key point that I hold in mind when leading or

over-seeing strategy is relevance. Thinking about

relevance can really help people to ask the difficult

questions about purpose and impact of an organisation.

As well as, I find, stimulating creative ways of

thinking about repurposing or refreshing the

organisation in order to make it more relevant.

This exercise in relevance can be quite similar to

undertaking a PEST exercise when we look at the

landscape and how we are situated within it, but often

I find when I go into organisations they have

undertaken a SWOT analysis and that can encourage

inward looking.

It is important to demand relevance because we will

look to see where we are situated.

For me, any starting point for strategic thinking is to

articulate the reason the organisation exists.

What impact they have and how it contributes to the

world that they want to be in existence.

Often re-examining organisation visions and missions

can help with this process.

So for me, when we look at an organisation's vision, we

are looking for a statement that the organisation wants

to exist.

We are using our ability to think imaginatively with

wisdom to a world which could come into being.

From there, we often move ourselves to thinking about

our contribution to making that vision a reality and

that's often our mission statement.

So that mission statement is the role that you would

play in contributing to the vision coming into

existence.

We are starting to situate the relevance of our

organisation into the wider context.

In my experience when turning our attention to

strategy, the most important question is why?

Often in organisations, very understandably, activity

plans, objectives and project planning can often stay

in the how, what, when and who?

The strategy is always about looking at the

contribution to, or the drift away from the mission of

the organisation.

This is the statement of how it articulates, why it

exists and what its purpose is.

Moving on to working with staff, or with bringing

people together.

For me, a strategy is a collaborative effort.

I wanted to share some lessons that I've learnt in my

experience of engaging a variety of opinions in the

strategic planning process.

Number one, is allowing ample time.

It always takes longer than one would imagine to do

effective strategic thinking and planning.

It requires various iterations and feedback and

presentation of new ideas to ensure people who have

contributed can see their contribution reflected in

later drafts.

Allowing more time always encourages more considered

responses rather than rushed answers.

Linked to this is the idea of place.

Personally, having worked with a lot of artist-led

organisations I'm told that taking artists and the

staff out of the office or the desk or Zoom, and

usually going for a walk, really creates the right

continues for imaginative thinking and thinking with

wisdom and thinking with refreshed eyes.

The place that these discussions take place is as

important as the discussion themselves.

The third point is around the role that different

people can take in any given strategic discussion.

So, this is about removing the reliance on one single

person say that the exec director or the CEO to be the

custodian of any strategy.

Often I will find that asking people to lead different

parts of the discussion, encourages greater investment

and contribution from other staff members.

Linked to this, another tip that I use is nominating a

why person in any discussion and that means that a

single person is only concerning themselves with the

why of the discussion.

So for example, they might ask the question, why does

this work matter?

Why does it have to happen?

Why does it have to happen now?

As opposed to being fully involved in the discussion

itself.

Finally, I encourage end to end thinking. Sometimes I

can find the strategic thinking can feel quite abstract

and disconnected for groups of staff.

So I often try and work with an end to end example,

drawn from the organisation's programme, so then the

staff can see the why sitting on top of the who, what,

when and how and it really helps to anchor the strategy

in reality for people.

Moving our attention to trustees and working and

including trustees in this process.

For this section, I'm going to be talking both as a

previous executive director and also, as a sitting

trustee at a charity.

So for me, trustees are sails and anchors.

As trustees, we act and sail by supporting and

encouraging momentum to the organisations we serve, but

also, we are an anchor, ensuring that activities are

linked to the mission or objectives, particularly

charitable objectives of an organisation.

This becomes a dual role which is important to tap into

during strategic planning.

The second point is collaboration.

I was actually very much brought up and told that when

we're working with boards, we are presenting something

to them, and then there is a discussion. But in a

previous role, a chair of mine urged me to bring in the

board at a much earlier stage, trying to encourage

greater collaboration and not to present something that

felt like it was in the final stages of completion.

So, that meant that the trustees were starting to be a

conduit for some of the ideas rather than again, the

executive director or the CEO holding all of that

important process to themselves.

For me, as a trustee, I think it is also important to

know when to listen, when to ask, and when to advice.

And for the best possible collaborative strategic

conversations, I often try and set out whether this is

a discussion that needs listening to and reflecting or

whether it needs lots of questions being asked or

whether actually we are eliciting advice from our

trustees at any given moment.

So then the trustee knows what is expected of them as

well as the strategy and the collaborative group.

The third point is around assumptions.

Trustees give a perspective outside the operational and

therefore, they are checking at checking assumptions

that we might hold about our own organisation.

They can also help us get out of a thinking rut or

recognise when we are really holding on to limiting

beliefs about the organisation.

So, it is very important for them to be in on the

conversation and to check and to prod us as to whether

we are falling down a rabbit hole of assumptions about

the organisation.

My final point and it is a more general point about

strategy.

Every strategy needs a corresponding way to measure its

effectiveness.

This should be a suitable measuring mechanism which

looks at key parts of the strategy that you've written

and shows where progress is being made, adjustments

will be necessary, or areas that have been neglected or

perhaps areas that are not serving the organisation's

purpose any longer.

So you can start to have a really important and

relevant conversation about where the organisation is.

Measuring the strategy at set intervals helps to ensure

that your relevance is always kept in mind.

So I would urge anybody to make sure that this is a

regular item in any board meeting.

Just to ensure this relevance is kept at the very front

of any organisation's mind.

So, those are some of my lessons, tips and experiences

of working, overseeing, encouraging strategic thinking

in organisations. Thank you so much for listening to

me.

MICHELLE WRIGHT:

Brilliant. Thank you so much, Sri. Thank you

everybody for attending this afternoon.

We will write up all the questions and answers and they

will be distributed with the slides.

Have a good evening everybody and thank you so much for

being here.

Cheerio.