



Event Summary

PCF member-led seminar: 'If I had my time again – capturing lessons learnt'

4pm – 5.30pm

13 October 2016

Institute for Government

We were delighted to welcome members to share challenges and discuss lessons learnt from their careers as public sector Chairs. The session was led by Chris Brodie, Chair of the Student Loans Company, who facilitated a lively discussion with members contributing their perspectives on a range of issues; he closed the session with reflections on his own experiences.

We are grateful to all who got involved and for the open atmosphere that allowed members to be frank about their challenges; as one member commented, *"I didn't know PCF could be such good group therapy"*.

To summarise some of the key points that were raised under Chatham House Rules:

- Digital board papers can be much easier for board members and secretariats than printed papers when done right. Though members raised concerns, such as ease of use and hiding the true length of papers, if you are trying to make your organisation efficient, green and digital, applying these principles to your own board papers sends the message that you are committed to them.
- Be confident enough to push for improvements sooner rather than later, to challenge the status quo at an early stage. One member felt in retrospect they had always acted three months too late.
- Some organisations struggle with a lack of proportionality from government requirements – for ALBs with very few or even no staff, demands from departments can be particularly difficult to fulfil. Patience, communication skills and a good relationship with your sponsor department are vital.
- New board members need to understand the type of board they are joining, how it works and what their role is. It can be particularly difficult for Chief Executives to understand the role of the board.
- Understanding the business is one of the most important ways of building collegiality and effectiveness. Sending new board members out to the shop floor so they know first-hand the organisation's strengths and challenges can be hugely beneficial.
- The quietest person at the board meeting may be the one who disagrees most strongly, and it is worth finding out why.

- Scary boards will never hear the truth about something going wrong until it is too late; you need an environment in which people are not too intimidated to bring bad news.
- There was a discussion on the value of private board meetings versus open board meetings. On the one hand it can be difficult to have meaningful debate in public, but on the other hand that they can help stakeholders understand why certain decisions are made and thus help to build consensus.
- Cutting down on papers, cutting down the length of meetings and insisting upon board papers having been read prior to meetings can hugely improve effectiveness of meetings; good summary sheets are also very valuable.
- It's not only Ministers that change posts regularly; there can be high churn amongst civil servants too. This can make building relationships a challenge.
- Organisations under tight control from central government may flourish with more autonomy, being regularly held accountable by their key performance indicators rather than going through multiple departments for every decision. It can be particularly difficult if you do not 'speak department'.
- It is important when things go wrong to be confident in pushing back against officials and politicians looking for someone to blame. Be prepared to take flak – if you are doing the right thing, people will see through the naysayers and bad press.
- It can be strange to represent shareholders when there is only one shareholder – government. You need to know whether you have a function or are seen as decorative and push for a clear definition and purpose for yourself.

Reflection on the almost unique position of the Public Chairs' Forum as a body that builds communication across organisations and departments closed the discussion. Our public bodies may be very different in their purpose and size, but there are many challenges all members have in common.