SKILLS AUDIT

Sam Henson explains why this forms an essential part of good governance

As the ‘vision setters and strategic decision-makers’ of diverse, often highly complicated and unique organisations, governing boards have an extensive and challenging role.

Effective governance requires a board with a diverse skill set; one that brings with it a multitude of experiences and knowhow that can help shape and make the crucial choices that lie ahead.

A skills audit is a tool that helps to build the character and competence of the board. The 2016 NGA/TES survey revealed that 83% of the 5,000 respondents said their governing board uses a skills audit.

Using the audit effectively

Of those, 64% used it to identify training needs; an equal number used it to assign to committees. Yet only 54% used it for recruitment and even fewer (47%) for succession planning. Perhaps even more surprising is that 27% were unclear if it was a helpful exercise or not.

This could be attributed to a number of reasons. Firstly the exercise is not seen in the correct context – as part of the strategic self-evaluation process of the board. Others may simply see it as unnecessary bureaucracy. NGA is aware that some boards simply don’t understand the point so everyone on the board fills in a new form every September only for them to be filed to gather dust.

The skills audit should be used to identify the experience and skills that your board still needs to deliver its functions effectively. It’s only effective if answered honestly and where the point of the audit is explained to those around the table. It’s not an exam or inspection; people shouldn’t feel pressurised into exaggerating responses in order to sell themselves or feel inadequate because they don’t have a degree in risk management.

This is a proactive step, to get a sense of the experience and needs of the board. The governing board as a whole should own this task, but the clerk can be invaluable in making sure the intelligence gathered is used effectively.

The new NGA model

In January 2017, the DfE released a new Competency Framework for Governance, structured around the DfE’s identified “six features of effective governance”. The Governance Handbook 2017 states that “Boards should carry out regular audits of the skills they possess... taking account of the department’s Competency Framework for Governance”.

The NGA skills audit has been updated to take account of, but not replicate, the DfE’s document. The Competency Framework has been written to cover all possible bases in school governance, from boards governing small primary schools to the trust boards of large multi academy trusts (MATs) overseeing the performance of multiple schools. It should be used to provide clarification of government expectations, rather than as a prescribed checklist.

NGA is firmly of the view that governing boards are best placed to assess which areas outlined in the framework are most important for them. While our new skills audit is structured around the DfE’s six features of effective governance, it doesn’t attempt to mirror all the 200-plus competencies, knowledge, skills and behaviours included. Instead it combines the core aspects of the framework with the experience and feedback of our members.

One of the biggest changes is the release of two separate models; one for governors, trustees and academy committee members of single schools and a separate version for trustees of MATs. This is to take account of the significant differences of governing as a MAT trustee compared with governing in a single school.

For example, if the matrix lists financial management experience as essential, but no one on the board meets this, the findings will be used to inform board recruitment. If it reveals that this expertise exists, but not specific to the education sector, training may be a more appropriate response.

It’s only effective if answered honestly

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Sam Henson is NGA’s head of information

Download NGA’s skills audit and skills matrix from www.nga.org.uk