

## EIGHT MAXIMS FOR CHAIRS OF BOARDS

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### 1. Watch the clock

If you do nothing else as a chair of meetings, start and finish on time. It's surprising how many meetings contrive to have a slow start – and then drag on way beyond the planned finishing time so that headteachers think their lives are slipping away as evening darkness arrives. Some chairs opt for timed business which is tricky if certain items end up requiring more time for debate. Better to be flexible in the moment but resolute about making up time and sometimes postponing an item for another day. And do not let the executive talk too much!

### 2. Speak clearly, listen keenly, smile often

Your fellow governors want you to lead at the top of the meeting, making them feel valued and welcome. They want to know what you think, but do not speak first on every item. They want to know that you are listening keenly to all views – before summarising and moving to a decision. If you are a better talker than a listener, plan with a colleague governor to restrain you through eye contact. If you are a better listener than a talker, do not leave your colleagues guessing. The timely smile is worth a hundred words. The judicious use of wit and humour is always welcome.

### 3. Plan B can be better than Plan A

You and the executive may have set out to present Plan A convincingly, and you may be absolutely on the right track. Do not hold back in orchestrating compelling arguments in favour of a planned course of action. Rehearse and revisit and review. Yet, always have a smidgen of doubt. Be prepared for fellow governors to see an alternative fork in the road. Listen to their arguments, consider their interpretations of facts and figures. Plan B may well emerge as a better route. That's not defeat – that's a triumph of listening, transparency and effective governance.

### 4. Let someone else have the last word

Chairs begin and end discussions on items at a meeting. That's what others expect – and is usually effective practice. Occasionally it is worth breaking that mould. Feelings may have been running high during the discussion of a sensitive item. There may have been agreeable disagreements. As chair, you do not have to have the final word, offering the *mot juste*. It might just be adroit to pass that torch to someone else on the board, if you are confident they will choose their words

carefully, and smile not scowl when doing so. The clerk can give a helpful unopinionated summary.

### **5. Unite all differences intact**

It may be why you were elected or nominated as chair – your ability to bring people together. Nudging folk towards a consensus they did not think was possible, uniting all differences intact – that can be a challenge, but an outcome worth pushing for. You may not get thanked immediately – but in the fullness of time, the chair's wisdom will be appreciated. And here's a question: should you ever move to a vote if you really do not need? Arguably, votes divide. Folk leave a room feeling they have been defeated – not what you want with a group of volunteers. Affirm rather than vote.

### **6. Wear your knowledge lightly**

The chair may well be the most knowledgeable governor in the room, perhaps through years of service, perhaps through working closely with the executive prior to the meeting, perhaps through personal and professional experience. By comparison, other members of the board may still be learning their way into the organisation or indeed into being a governor or trustee. Climb inside their shoes, see the meeting from their viewpoint. Use your in-depth knowledge yet wear it lightly – and be happy to be corrected when you make a mistake.

### **7. If you stand still long enough you become a radical**

Over time, trends and fashions and opinions change. The zeitgeist five years ago may not be the same as today. You may have become chair when certain educational orthodoxies prevailed, but those orthodoxies are now different. Ask yourself where you stand – socially, politically, educationally – in relation to current thinking. Have you stood still? Have you shifted? Wise chairs know themselves well. They remember that if they stand still long enough they become radicals – at least, as perceived by others...

### **8. Blink! Life goes faster than you think**

How long have you served on the board, and how long as chair? When is your sell-by date do you think? Will someone nudge you? Research into effective chairs and their lengths of service is predictably inconclusive: three years may suit some boards in certain modes, ten years may suit others. Skilled chairs will take counsel from trusted board members and executive leaders about when is the best moment to pass on the board leadership baton. Plan your exit strategy for the right moment for the organisation; think about likely successors and offer your opinion. Leave with no backward glance.

This is an extract from Roy Blatchford's latest book, published this month: [\*The A-Z of Good Governance\*](#)