

4 March 2021

## Two that you are and one that you're not

Effective boards feature a congruous mixture of styles. To help identify your board member style types, GGI has developed a set of cards – something to use as an ice-breaker at the start of a board development session, perhaps, when you might feel under pressure to perform with wisdom and gravitas.

The cards offer individual and collective insights. Board members are asked to choose two cards that represent them and one that doesn't – and then to discuss their choices. They're also invited to look at the overall mix of types for their board and to consider which types they could do with more (or less) of.

The cards, designed by Louisa McDonald, are based on ten board member styles defined by Julia Unwin, former chief executive of the Rowntree Foundation, together with a couple added by GGI.

### Boardroom style

Style is different to skill or experience; it's a particular way of behaviour or how things are done. Style is important in the boardroom because we have to use shorthand in corralling a roomful of people towards a proper decision and fielding a particular style helps predictability.

You can rely on Basheer to be the citizen champion. Ted is always bullish at taking risks. Thank goodness we still have Olivia as our history holder on the board; she knows what works and where the 2012 induction manual is hidden.

Julia Unwin writes: "All those voices, and all those questions, make a really strong board. All good boards hold in balance the entrepreneurialism of the strategist and the risk taker, along with compliance king or queen, and the data champion. I have seen boards that are entirely entrepreneurial and they are pretty scary. I have also seen boards that are entirely compliance driven, and they are terrifying."

It's also useful to know the styles of absent board members so we can represent their likely point of view. In practice it's a safe way of raising a point you are unsure of: 'I'm sure if Bill was here he'd want to challenge the cost of this...'



## Striking a boardroom balance

Of course the cards alone are not enough to define a board but they certainly get discussions going, especially if comment is invited on missing board members: 'Well he's definitely not a peacemaker!'

On a serious note, the cards encourage us to think about each other's style and, if we don't know, to enquire. And they can help to maintain balance in any board.

There are numerous ways to assess the make-up of your board – by looking at the balance of introverts and extraverts, for example, or categorising members by Jungian type, or using complexity theory or spiral dynamics. And there is an entire industry offering ways to categorise people by psychological type, many inspired by Myers-Briggs.

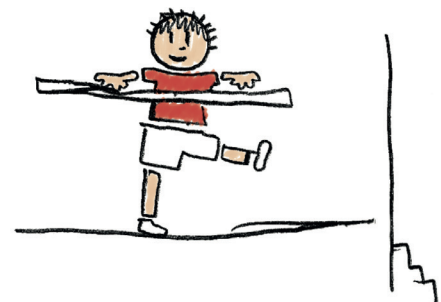
Whichever method you use, it's important to get the mix right in your board. In the many board observations we've made over the years we've concluded that the most important attribute of a successful board isn't balance (which can be subjected to a tick box exercise), it's harmony (which can't).

But the cards will offer most boards some interesting insights. And they do seem to stay relevant. Julia says: "In the years since I observed so many board meetings and produced these pen pictures, I am constantly surprised at how accurate they still are, and how important it is for all boards to have these very diverse characters and behaviours if they are to succeed".

Worrying though it might be to learn that no one claims to be a leader, strategist or compliance queen, it might prompt the thought that it's high time you found one.

## Boardroom types

- **Peacemaker:** can't we find a common way?
- **Challenger:** can't we do better? Is it just because it has always been done this way?
- **History holder:** we need to go back to our roots, and remember what worked in the past.
- **Compliance queen:** always says, can we afford it? What will the auditors say? Is this legal?
- **Passionate advocate:** will respond, surely we must take a risk, we must do more.
- **Data champion:** all the evidence shows that however often we do that, it makes no difference to the outcomes.
- **Wise counsellor:** says, we are not the only people trying to tackle this issue, we need to think carefully, plan properly, and take this step by step.
- **Inspiring leader:** will describe her vision, will enthuse and excite.
- **Fixer:** says I think we can get together later and sort this out.
- **Risk-taker:** says, the crisis is simply too great. Let's just spend the money, the funds will flood in.
- **Strategist:** says, we need to think beyond 2012, and then our position will be much stronger and the whole environment will be different.





- **User champion:** says, I am worried that we are ignoring the interests of our users. We haven't mentioned their needs all though this meeting.

Have we missed any types? We'd be interested to hear your views.



## Illuminations

- A strong board brings many benefits to any organization; good representation of all types will broaden a board's perspective and improve its judgement.
- Achieving balance on a board could be a tick-box exercise; achieving harmony is a trickier, subtler feat.
- Boards should be preparing for the upcoming challenges of integrated care by ensuring that they are diverse and self-aware.

If this Illumination prompts any questions or comments – or if you'd like your own deck of boardroom style type cards – please call us on 07732 681120 or email [advice@good-governance.org.uk](mailto:advice@good-governance.org.uk)

