Governance core principles

With almost 30 years' experience in the NHS, including several as a chief executive, GGI Director of Delivery Darren Grayson has seen his fair share of organisational success and failures. He, together with our team and supporters maintain that good governance is essential in creating a fairer, better world. In this piece Darren highlights some of the most important principles for boards to consider when reviewing their own approach to governance.

A code for NHS board members to live by

Governance should add value. It should be transparent and ethical, focused on tackling operational challenges in ways that complement the big picture vision; always seeking the best outcomes for stakeholders, not merely for ways to stay out of trouble. From the smallest charity to the greatest public institution, good governance is in everyone's interests, enabling organisations to build a sustainable, better future for all of us. It's incumbent on NHS board members to work with these ideals in mind. It's their duty to remain focused on broad, strategic goals as well as tackling day-to-day issues.

Delivering on these dual – sometimes apparently conflicted – responsibilities is easier when some basic principles are kept in mind.

Assurance beats reassurance

Board members need to understand and value the difference between assurance – proactively establishing for yourself that all is well – and reassurance – reactively having your concerns dispelled by someone else.

Executives and non-execs – vive la difference!

On a healthy board, non-executive members have the luxury of being able to remove themselves from day-to-day operational issues to consider the bigger picture. The challenge facing executive members is to maintain a perspective that is simultaneously strategic and operational. A balanced, collaborative partnership is essential.

Challenge is positive

There is no place for ego or defensiveness in good governance. Scrutiny should be seen as an important lever for driving improvement, not as a threat or a chore to be endured. As well as asking the right questions, board members have a duty to constructively challenge the answers.

Board as regulator of first resort

In a sector as highly regulated as the NHS, there can be a tendency for national bodies to dominate board thinking. But rather than wait to discover what a CQC inspection reveals and then deal with it, a mature board should already know about any issues and have measures in place to address them. There should be no surprises in governance.

Sustaining core principles

As well as being heavily regulated, the NHS is also in a constant state of flux. In a landscape as changeable as this, it's easy for core principles to be swept aside by the latest new initiative. But it's the duty of board members to maintain focus, review regularly, and ensure these principles live on.

Remember to look within

Honest self-reflection, both collectively and individually, is arguably one of the most important areas of board activity. Using the key lines of enquiry set out in the Well Led Framework, development needs should be continually assessed and addressed so board members are well equipped to carry out their essential roles.