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Balancing the books: the challenges of chairing a library charity



by [WILL HARVEY](#)

There are no easy solutions to balancing the needs of stakeholders, but having a board where tough issues are raised and debated is crucial to success.



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I have been chair of the board for the past 18 months at Libraries Unlimited, which is a charity representing more than 50 libraries across Devon. During this time I have found myself navigating five particular challenges which are applicable to anyone in the role of board chair.

Many of these challenges emerged from a recent board, chair and CEO evaluation process that we have completed internally. We asked all board members to complete a short online survey, followed-up with individual discussions conducted by the chair and deputy chair. The process helped to generate quantitative and qualitative data, raise important issues, provide two-way feedback and encourage reflection and discussion among the board, much of which has helped to inform my own thinking around how to balance the conflicting challenges I have faced as chair.

Strategy and operations

The first challenge has been around balancing strategic and operational discussions on the board. We have diverse views around prioritising the strategic vision of the organisation, which is part of our responsibility for helping to navigate the organisation in the medium and long term, and engaging in operational issues, which are important to oversee in the short term.

What I have realised is that emphasising either strategy or operations too heavily is undesirable. An over-emphasis on strategy can create a vision of utopia that is overly distant from the current

realities of the organisation. An over-emphasis on operations can lead to the board meddling in activities which are the responsibility of the senior management team. A board needs to agree on and engage with a strategy that is both aspirational and relevant to how operational data is reported, so that they are aligned and not in conflict with one another.

Emphasising either strategy or operations too heavily is undesirable

This is related to the second challenge—how to link the big picture to the minutiae. There are too many management concepts that describe the same phenomenon, and myriad competing definitions of the same concepts. Rather than trying to create new concepts and definitions, I followed the [UK Corporate Governance Code](#), which states that the role of the board is to “establish the company’s purpose, values and strategy, and satisfy itself that these and its culture are aligned”. I then worked with the CEO and board to create a one-page table that highlights and aligns six key concepts in relation to the organisation. These are:

- Mission: what business are we in now and in the future
- Purpose: inspiring staff to do great work and expressing our impact on the lives of others
- Values: the desired behaviours of our employees
- Strategy: doing something new, building on what we are doing, and reacting to emerging opportunities
- Goals: the ongoing aspirations of our organisation
- Measures: assurance that what the board hears and observes aligns with the organisation’s purpose, aspirations and values.

I found this process helpful in ensuring clarity around key concepts and in aligning the big picture (e.g. mission, purpose, values and strategy) with the minutiae (e.g. goals and measures). It also can serve as a barometer for testing whether any future initiatives and activities are salient—or a distraction—for the organisation.

Support and challenge

The third challenge is balancing supporting and constructively challenging the senior management team. As chair, I am fortunate to have a strong professional relationship with the CEO. I have found it important to show support to him at crucial times; for instance when he first started in the role, during times of difficulty for the organisation and when having to make some tough decisions, including the closure of physical libraries (alongside an increase in online library services) during the current coronavirus pandemic.

While it is essential to have a positive relationship between the chair and CEO, if that relationship is too strong then it can potentially alienate the chair’s relationship with board members and employees, and influence the power and decision-making dynamic in board and committee meetings. It can also negatively impact on the ability and willingness of the chair to hold the CEO (and the senior management team) to account around data, targets and performance.

If the chair–CEO relationship is too strong then it can potentially alienate the chair’s relationship with board members and employees

The chair needs to find the right dose of support, meaning that the CEO and senior management team feel empowered to make decisions, and challenge so that the chair and board members have the necessary information from the senior management team to understand and analyse the health of the organisation.

Triple bottom line

The fourth challenge is balancing the importance of the triple bottom line: economic, social and societal considerations. Libraries Unlimited is a charity that requires a sound economic model, including multiple million pounds of revenue and careful management of costs to employ several hundred staff and to maximise our service to the 750,000 residents in Devon, all of whom are eligible for free membership of our library services. We are also a charity that emphasises community engagement and socialisation, for example through physical spaces for people to meet, socialise, learn, read and enjoy new experiences.

We often find tensions between our financial constraints and our social and societal obligations and aspirations

We have some ambitious societal goals, including carbon neutrality and prioritising areas of deprivation. I mention the **triple bottom line** because as a board, we recognise the value of all three areas, but often find tensions between our financial constraints and our social and societal obligations and aspirations.

Of course, every organisation has its own unique structure and set of priorities, but what the current pandemic has highlighted is the need for balancing financial resilience (e.g. existing and new sources of revenue and cost management), social compassion (e.g. supporting our employees and serving our communities) and societal considerations (e.g. our responsibility for addressing problems). One of the challenges we face is that our stakeholders often emphasise different considerations, which leads to the final challenge—balancing the needs of multiple stakeholders.

Balancing perspectives

We have witnessed in the last year—from the Business Roundtable and the World Economic Forum, among others—a **shift in rhetoric** from shareholders to stakeholders. Like all organisations, we have a variety of stakeholders that we serve, including staff, commissioners, friends' groups, volunteers, library members and funders.

We are fortunate that all of these groups are focused on ensuring we provide an outstanding service. The structure of our board stipulated in our memorandum and articles of association includes two staff trustees, two community trustees, five independent trustees and the CEO. This means that we have representation on the board from different groups. The positive aspect of this structure is it ensures that we are not myopic in privileging the needs of a particular stakeholder.

However, it requires careful management as it can mean that board members who are representing a certain group may emphasise their needs without reflecting on the wider considerations of other stakeholder groups. For instance, we had some difficult discussions when deciding to close libraries during the coronavirus pandemic, when some trustees were particularly concerned about the health

and wellbeing of our staff, and others were concerned about providing a vital educational, social and health service to our communities on behalf of our commissioners.

Of course, both are essential and there are no easy solutions to balancing the sometimes competing perspectives of board members and the different needs of our stakeholders, but I have found that creating an environment on the board where tough issues are raised, challenged, debated, voted and actioned, is a positive step in the right direction.

Will Harvey is associate dean and professor of management at the University of Exeter, and chair of the board of [Libraries Unlimited](#).



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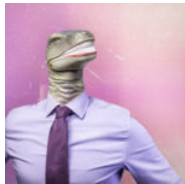
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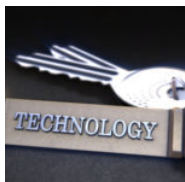
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