



Governance in NHS Wales

Section Seven - Understanding the dual role of executive directors

All executive directors have a dual role.

Firstly, as a result of their management relationship to their chief executive - in this respect their accountability is defined by their job description and by the personal objectives and standards of performance they have agreed with their chief executive.

Secondly, as a result of them being a board member - in this respect when they are operating in the board they are also accountable to the chair for the same accountabilities as the independent members.

Moving from manager to board member as an executive director on to the board is one of the most significant steps in a manager's career. To be successful, the manager must be able to appreciate and be able at will to position themselves in a whole new viewpoint whilst at the same time being able to maintain their existing viewpoint.

To join the board, a manager must be capable of raising their game up a level. Executive directors must be capable of a "helicopter experience" - being able to view their own and the organisation's work from above as though they were an independent objective observer. It is from here that they may be able to see something new or something that could be added or taken away from what is being done to make it better.

In the latest corporate governance guidance there is growing reference to the role of board member as somebody who is knowledgeable and experienced in the work sector of the organisation and board, but who carefully ensures their view remains independent and objective.

At the beginning it can be quite confusing for the executive directors and the other board members alike who have been used to seeing an individual solely in the role of a manager. Executive directors need to be able to switch to this helicopter/objectivity perspective.

For example, if they have been working long and hard on a new strategy for three months with their team - it may have been difficult and stressful to complete but now they are really proud of it and they bring it to the board for scrutiny and approval.

In an ideal world they should be able to put it on the board table and switch to a helicopter perspective and view the work as though they'd never seen it before and join colleagues in rigorously and enthusiastically scrutinising the strategy to see if it can be further improved before implementation.

This in practice can be quite difficult to do as it is very easy to become defensive as a result of the emotional capital that has built up with the work and commitment that went into the strategy. But it is helpful if executives can remember to switch into board member mode.

Some board members never present management work, they get their deputies to do it. This has two advantages. Firstly, it makes it easier for the executive director to stay in board member mode.

Secondly, it begins to groom and prepare others for board activities and provides potential succession

arrangements should an executive director move on in their career or for any reason.

Chairs can remind executives to assume their board member role when necessary. Independent members can remember to have some compassion for executives who are reviewing their own work whilst still needing carry out excellent scrutiny and due diligence.

Executive directors can telegraph which mode they are in at any moment - manager or board member - other board members can ask too. This enables people to suggest a change of perspective when appropriate.

Team building is necessary to build the relationships and raise interactive skills of individual members so that full open and honest exchanges can be achieved without creating personal offence or defensiveness.

Chairs and chief executives should consider arranging training and coaching to help new executives move into the board effectively. Regular feedback on performance in both aspects of their role is also helpful in building an effective board.