

A best practice guide for healthy, high-performing boards

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Our board development work with SW Healthcare

It's recognised that a highly effective board is one of the fundamental drivers of organisational performance, particularly in times of change. The NHS Leadership Academy has worked with a wide range of organisations to improve the effectiveness of their boards and is well-equipped to help boards transition to a new era of shared, distributed and devolved authority.

Our board and executive team development work is just one example of a range of long and short-term solutions offered by the Academy to empower colleagues at all stages of their careers to fulfil their potential. The aim is to empower senior leadership teams to:

- Establish a balance between operational issues and strategic aims
 - Improve their ability to lead conversations into actionable decisions
 - Build discipline so that meetings run better, getting the most value out of everyone's precious time
 - Balance airtime more equally between members to allow for different personalities and approaches
 - Narrow the gap between what they're thinking and what they're saying to bring more truths to the surface
 - Develop the balance between decision-making board meetings and those which are more reflective and focus on learning
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The client

SW Healthcare is a federation of all of the 32 GP surgeries in South Worcestershire, which serve over 304,000 patients. It was formed in September 2013 in response to the rapidly changing NHS landscape and the belief that they were stronger as a collective than individual practices. This is certainly evident in their outputs; they consistently perform in the top 10% across a number of indicators nationally.

The federation has the approach of a social enterprise and firmly believes that this model of collaborative working provides the most desirable outcomes for patients. Member GP surgeries remain independent organisations, but benefit from being part of a larger organisation.

Their situation

SW Healthcare's vision and purpose is closely aligned to the Five Year Forward View and they place great importance on innovative and cost-efficient models of healthcare.

Despite this, its board was in a challenging place when they contacted the Academy. There was some scepticism about the value of spending time on governance, and the board was focused more on operational decisions than on developing their strategic direction. At their meetings the board often found it a challenge to have concise discussions that reached a definitive conclusion.

Programme director Rosemary Williams said: "This development work was very much needed, but one of the greatest initial challenges was convincing some of the board GPs of the need to invest time in the process."

Some of the challenges included:

- **The stage of maturity of the board and its formation and development as a team**
- **Constant tensions between the size of the agenda and the time made available to meet as a board:** This is typical of boards and can lead to poorer quality conversations and debates. It also meant that more important items were left to an annual off-site meeting of the board
- **The strategic versus operational focus of the board's agenda:** While operating as a successful board requires asking fundamental questions about its vision and purpose, agendas are extremely busy and typically operationally focused. This can be a hard balance to achieve, with the focus tending to swing towards more pressing operational issues to the detriment of strategy
- **Negative perceptions of board development:** Some board members saw it as 'touchy feely' and a nice to have
- **Board leadership:** SW Healthcare rotated chairs for each meeting. While equitable and giving everyone the opportunity to develop chairing skills, it left the leadership of the board less clear

32 SURGERIES IN SOUTH WORCESTERSHIRE
SERVING OVER 304,000 PATIENTS

Our approach

The first step was to establish which organisation could work with SW Healthcare and help them achieve their objectives. The Academy works with a faculty who specialise in organisational and leadership development. A vital part of the Academy's structure, they may be single-handed practitioners, part of a small consultancy or team or working within larger consultancies or academic organisations. We suggested the faculty members we felt would be the best fit.

SW Healthcare chose to work with Practive, a consultancy specialising in the practice of leadership which has worked with a cross-section of organisations in healthcare. Leadership and organisational development consultant James Butcher led the work: "When we first met the board, there was a mixture of enthusiasm and scepticism about embarking on a process of board development. GPs will generally have had less experience of corporate life and these types of processes than some of our other clients, and are likely to have more questions about its purpose and value."

James had some initial discussions with the board and was keen to make the work as accessible and seamless for them as possible: "As a practitioner, it can be tempting to push for extended time off site, for example, but incorporating ourselves into their meetings in their usual environment gave us a more authentic take on where they were at and was less intrusive and disruptive for them."

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James Butcher, organisational development consultant

"It's important to recognise the pressures boards are under and not be too precious about the demands you put on them. At the same time you have to make it clear that this type of work does require the board to commit time and energy in a way they may not be used to. It's a bit of balancing act; we work with what feels to them like reasonable amounts of time."

First board meeting

The work started with the board being offered an overview of some of the characteristics of healthy boards, and the kind of processes that can help a board develop its effectiveness. The board was then asked to consider what they wanted to achieve from the investment of time and effort they were making. The themes were:

Business approach

- Move from entrepreneurial phase to being an established business
- Clarity of vision and the ability to translate it into board roles and responsibilities
- Balance the GP role and the board role
- Have conversations that reach a conclusion
- Engage better with practices and the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG)
- Agree on the deliverables they wanted and how to achieve them





Relationships

- Understand behavioural norms and motivations - both group and individual
- To gel as a team – understanding each other’s strengths and weaknesses
- Understand each other’s motivations
- How to balance the dynamics on the board
- Learn to influence others in the system

Second board meeting

Before the meeting, a role player worked with SW Healthcare’s CEO so that she could practice handling a difficult stakeholder. This process helps someone experiment with different approaches to a challenging conversation and to feel more confident having the conversation for real. Practive then went on to facilitate the first hour of the meeting. The HR director had prepared a draft of the vision, mission, objectives, and values, and board members worked in executive and non-executive pairs to review different aspects of it, with a plenary discussion to confirm changes.

There was then a short review of what members were noticing about the way they discussed the issue. The aim was for board members to pay more attention to what is working or not working in the way they have discussions – and to voice those observations. The remainder of the meeting was observed, and at the end of the meeting, feedback was shared and reflection encouraged.

James said: “This included the fact that for the period of the meeting that we tracked airtime, about 75% of contributions were made by four people. This highlighted the challenge of ensuring everyone was given equal opportunity to speak.”

After the board meeting, SW Healthcare agreed to use the “Essentials of Whole Organisation Leadership” framework as the basis for an online self-assessment survey. The one page framework consists of

straightforward descriptions of what it means to focus on strategic - rather than operational - issues. The aim is to give a board a practical guide to shifting the focus of their agenda.

The board also decided to consult their stakeholders on their views about the federation’s purpose, agenda, and effectiveness. Practive designed a bespoke survey to be used online and in face-to-face interviews.

Third board meeting

The meeting started with a 45 minute session facilitated by Practive. The board took stock of the progress they had made and discussed the next steps in the process: collecting feedback from the federation’s stakeholders and convening a board away day. They also reviewed themes from their self-assessment survey.

The meeting ended with Practive’s observations of the discussions, linking to the feedback from previous sessions.



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Rosemary Williams, programme director



Stakeholder survey

The ability to influence in the system is critical for boards, and the board were encouraged to ask themselves: ‘How do we run our organisation effectively?’ and ‘How are we intervening in the system?’ An online stakeholder survey helped establish whether – and how effectively – this was happening from a stakeholder perspective. 100+ people were contacted, including:

- Locality GPs
- Practice managers
- CCG non-executive directors and accountable officers
- Federation staff
- Local authority
- Acute trusts
- Health and Care Trust (the NHS organisation which provides community services across Worcestershire)

The main themes were:

- The need for a coherent, consistent vision
- Establishing a mandate for the federation to represent primary care
- Improving engagement with member practices, other providers and the CCG
- Future funding
- The role of the federation in supporting the development of the Alliance Board, which was set up to facilitate integration of care across providers

The feedback helped the board understand the impact they had been having in the system, and to see the value of time invested in conversations with stakeholders.

Board away day

An away day was held to continue the board development work, and focused on:

- Reviewing the feedback gathered from stakeholders
- Agreeing a response to the feedback with respect to funding, the federation’s mandate, and engagement with stakeholders
- Agreeing board members roles and responsibilities, and considering a new structure for the management team
- Reviewing board members’ MBTI profiles and the implications for team dynamics, making decisions and having more disciplined conversations
- Agreeing an engagement strategy with practices and the CCG

James found that the day had a very different feel to it than some of the earlier meetings he’d observed: “Board members noticed how they had so much more energy meeting during the day, rather than after their surgeries, and with time to discuss important issues in depth.”

Next steps

Four months on from the away day, Practive joined another board meeting at which the board reviewed their original objectives, all of which they had made good progress on. The meeting was efficiently chaired and ended ahead of time, with board members alert to the risk of getting bogged down in detail. An important theme from the discussion was the need to agree a new business strategy to meet the financial challenges the federation faces, and the board decided to convene a second away day to address this critical issue.

A highly effective board is one of the fundamental drivers of organisational performance, particularly in times of change. For more information on how we can help your board to optimise its potential, email:

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or call **0113 322 5651**



Outcomes so far

The work with SW Healthcare is not yet complete, but the board has already achieved a range of outcomes, including more disciplined conversations, better balance between operational and strategic issues and a greater emphasis on learning as a board. So far, the development work has helped the board:

- Shift from an operational to strategic focus, creating time and space to engage with policy as well as practice
- Explore ways in which policy can be used to increase the viability of general practices in the federation and improve patient care
- Develop more consistent chairing skills
- Manage their own development, including collecting data from member practices and other stakeholders and assessing their own performance as strategic leaders
- Recognise the value of committing time and effort to their development as a board

Rosemary summarises: “Real progress has been made, particularly in restructuring the board and developing our vision and values. Not only have we recognised the need to engage with stakeholders, we’ve talked to them via the survey and have discussed the results with them face to face through a programme of practice visits.”

But the board is still developing: “We still need support to ensure we’re living the vision and values and investing time in building long-term relationships.”

As with any learning and development though, the challenge is for the group to maintain the momentum when the facilitator has stepped away. Observes James: “Part of our approach is to encourage people to take responsibility for some of the development processes themselves - in this case, collecting feedback from stakeholders. We think this helps create a development mindset, and makes people less reliant on external help.”

Our advice for healthy, high-performing boards

Says James: “Boards need to make best use of the limited time they do have, and this work can really help with that. People often get frustrated that meetings run for too long without concrete decisions being made, but everyone needs to recognise that they’re part of the problem and part of the solution.”

“Boards have such an important leadership role in terms of strategy and culture and relationships, yet the temptation is to spend the majority of the time on operational issues – perhaps because they don’t always have a clear picture of what it looks like in practice to be focused on the organisation’s vision or strategy. This work can help the board understand what it means to be a strategic leader and to do that collectively.”

There are some really straightforward ways of improving the quality of board discussions:

- Simple things like table layout can make a difference to the quality of the conversation
- Meeting during the day as oppose to ‘after hours’ can make a difference to energy levels
- Make more time for in-depth conversations. Consider alternating business meetings and more seminar-like meetings to accommodate this
- Clarify a purpose for each agenda item – e.g. for information, consultation, or decision? Then, is what you’re saying contributing to the purpose of the item? This can help with having a more disciplined discussion
- Assign a time for each item, allowing the chair to focus the discussion within that slot
- Confirm any decisions made as you close the discussion
- Take time out during the meeting to reflect on what’s working and what isn’t - this will help steadily improve the way discussions are conducted



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