

Debra Allcock Tyler



IT'S A **BATTLE** ON THE **BOARD**

The no-fibbing guide for trustees



dsc

directory of social change

What they said about the book ...

‘Good governance is about more than process – it’s also about people. This book “written by a human being for human beings”, helps us put trust back into trustee relationships.’

Vicky Browning, Chief Executive, ACEVO

‘This is a refreshing read. It reveals so imaginatively the human side of being a trustee and what that means in a charity board setting. It’s practical as well, with a plethora of useful checklists, tips and advice. It *had* to be Debra to write such a ground-breaking book!’

Rosie Chapman, Governance Consultant

‘Debra Allcock Tyler’s new book on charity governance is like none other on the topic. The style is frank and down to earth. It has very useful good practice materials and concentrates on the all-important people issues that so easily lead to dysfunctional governance. A must for all charity trustees, especially more experienced ones.’

Lindsay Driscoll, former Charity Commissioner and trustee of many and varied charities

‘This book tells it like it is on a charity board and is full of wisdom and practical tips, delivered with Debra’s trademark verve. Even a small dose will make you a better trustee.’

Philip Kirkpatrick, Partner, Head of Charity and Social Enterprise Department, Bates Wells

‘This is a brilliant, personal primer for board members on how to combine best practice and process with emotional intelligence and the human factor. It’s like a long, lively conversation with a warm, empathetic, very experienced and astute fellow trustee.’

Dr Andrew Purkis, Trustee, Directory of Social Change, former Charity Commission board member and former chair or vice-chair of seven UK charities

‘A very practical approach to trusteeship that new as well as experienced trustees will find useful. The real-life examples and references to board behaviours, including the relationship between the board and charity staff, is a welcome guide for charities seeking to build an effective governance team.’

Jacqueline Williams, Leadership and Governance Consultant and Trainer

‘I absolutely loved it. It was a stonking read. If you want to excel at being a trustee, read this book. For new trustees and old hands alike, it’s full of food for thought on avoiding the behaviours which compromise the very charity that you’re meant to be supporting. It will help you to become a more humble trustee – one that understands their role in speaking out, debating and asking the right questions, but who can balance that with motivating, learning and, importantly, listening. And with this book, you’ll get to enjoy some juicy stories along the way!’

Penny Wilson, Chief Executive, Getting on Board

‘Debra writes from the head and the heart to deliver a perfect combination of big thinking and practical gems. As well as being full of tips, insights, anecdotes and wisdom, this guide is especially useful in addressing the sometimes fraught relationships, behaviours and culture in charities. Debra reveals the psychology behind it all, which challenged me to take a good look in the mirror.’

John Williams, Vice-Chair of the Association of Chairs and former Charity Commissioner

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Published by the Directory of Social Change (Registered Charity no. 800517 in England and Wales)

Office: Suite 103, 1 Old Hall Street, Liverpool L3 9HG

Tel: 020 4526 5995

Visit www.dsc.org.uk to find out more about our books, subscription funding website and training events. You can also sign up for e-newsletters so that you're always the first to hear about what's new.

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Print and digital editions first published 2020

Reprinted 2021

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ISBN 978 1 78482 068 8 (print edition)

ISBN 978 1 78482 069 5 (digital edition)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Cover and text design by Kate Griffith

Typeset by Marlinzo Services, Frome

Printed and bound in the UK by Page Bros, Norwich



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About the author

Debra is the Chief Executive of the Directory of Social Change (DSC) and has worked in the charity sector for over 35 years. Among numerous other roles, she is currently Vice-President of the Soldiering On Through Life Trust Awards and co-chairs the judging panel with the General the Lord Dannatt. She is also a Trustee of In Kind Direct, one of the Prince's Foundation charities, a Trustee of the Berkshire Community Foundation and an Ambassador for Africa Advocacy Foundation for women and girls at risk of or affected by female genital mutilation. In the past, she has served as a trustee of several charities and was the co-founder and first Chair of the Small Charities Coalition. She was on the Charity Commission's SORP committee for over seven years and the Vice-Chair of Governors of Whiteknights Primary School for six years.

She is a renowned public speaker with many years' experience of training and coaching and an internationally published author of several books on management and leadership, including *It's Tough at the Top*, *The Pleasure and the Pain* and *It's Murder in Management*. Debra has a regular monthly column in *Third Sector* magazine and has appeared on Radio 4's *The Moral Maze*.

About the Directory of Social Change

At the Directory of Social Change (DSC), we believe that the world is made better by people coming together to serve their communities and each other. For us, an independent voluntary sector is at the heart of that social change and we exist to support charities, voluntary organisations and community groups in the work they do. Our role is to:

- **provide practical information** on a range of topics from fundraising to project management in both our printed publications and e-books;
- **offer training** through public courses, events and in-house services;
- **research funders** and maintain a subscription database, *Funds Online*, with details on funding from grant-making charities, companies and government sources;
- **offer bespoke research** to voluntary sector organisations in order to evaluate projects, identify new opportunities and help make sense of existing data;
- **stimulate debate and campaign** on key issues that affect the voluntary sector, particularly to champion the concerns of smaller charities.

We are a registered charity ourselves but we self-fund most of our work. We charge for services, but cross-subsidise those which charities particularly need and cannot easily afford.

Visit our website www.dsc.org.uk to see how we can help you to help others and have a look at www.fundsonline.org.uk to see how DSC could improve your fundraising. Alternatively, call our friendly team at **020 4526 5995** to chat about your needs or drop us a line at cs@dsc.org.uk.

Acknowledgements

In my over 35 years' experience in the charity sector I have worked with a lot of boards of trustees – people who have inspired and taught me (even those who accidentally showed me what not to do!).

I can't possibly name all of the wonderful people whom I have worked alongside, led or followed during my adventures with trustees. But I can say a huge thank you to all of my amazing DSC trustees over the years and, in particular, the current cohort: Caron Bradshaw, William Butler, Joyce Fraser, Matt Hill, Emily Hughes, Anneka Kapadia, Lizzie Kenyon, Phyllida Perrett, Andrew Purkis, Kashif Shabir and Lesley Thornley. They have really demonstrated brilliant governance during the Covid-19 crisis, because they had already established a solid base of trust and communication on which to build.

My colleagues on the boards of In Kind Direct and the Berkshire Community Foundation who demonstrate such commitment to the cause and dedication to the charities we love.

The brilliant leadership shown by our Chair at Whiteknights Primary School, Mark A'Bear and the visible demonstration of 'leadership as partnership' he shared with the school's Head Teacher, Francois Walker. I miss working with them!

Special thanks go to trustees who contributed their top tips to chapter 11 of this book and all those individuals who, over the course of many years, shared with me their joys and struggles of dealing with boards of trustees and, ultimately, inspired me to write this book. I would also like to thank those who read the early scripts of the book and provided valuable feedback: Rosie Chapman, Lindsay Driscoll, Lizzie Kenyon, Philip Kirkpatrick and Andrew Purkis.

And some personal mentions of folk who have inspired and guided me in my own trustee journey over the decades and never given up on helping me to be better: Maria Pemberton, wise guide and mentor; Lesley Thornley for making sure I know my facts; Rosie Chapman for her common sense and practical approach to getting it right; Tesse Akpeki for her passion and deep-rooted understanding of what it means to be a good trustee; Catherine Johnstone for tenacity in all things governance (it can be done if you don't give up!); and finally, Andrew Hind whose calm good sense has kept me sane during many tough times.

A very special mention to Margaret Lloyd, former Chair of DSC, who sadly lost her life to cancer and was both a mentor and a friend and whose presence and wise guidance I miss deeply.

And finally to my life partner, Andy Wood, who listens, argues, makes me see the other side of the story and always supports me by making sure I have space and time to be a trustee.



Foreword

As trustees, we often struggle with limited resources. We have to balance difficult and conflicting needs and priorities within frameworks of strategy, policy, regulation, internal structures and compliance – all to ultimately serve significant, essential and heart-breaking causes. Many of us are driven by a passion to achieve social change and that is intertwined with the desire to lead with impact. Effective trustees are creators and drivers in the lives of organisations, and in this arena, relationships matter. Impactful change is not achieved without building healthy and sustainable relationships.

It's a Battle on the Board is a book with a difference. It recognises that self-awareness and emotional, social and cultural intelligence are at the core of exemplary leadership and need to be twinned with collective awareness in a hyper-connected world in which success goes beyond financial sustainability. Speaking from her own experience on the board as a trustee, chair, and chief executive, Debra brings a perspective of humanness to what it means to be a trustee.

As a woman of colour who has served in various trustee and non-executive roles and as a governance professional, I found Debra's take on trusteeship not only stimulating and thoughtful but also a practical, balanced and informative read. It's refreshing to see attention paid to the psychology of decision-making, managing risk and dealing with crisis. As important as it is to know *how* to achieve good governance and leadership, it is equally crucial to know *why*, *what*, *who* and *when*. Debra solves these and many other puzzles that charity boards and executive teams face, demonstrating that they both need to work in tandem.

In the book you'll find two fictional trustees – Ace the Awesome and Dash the Dreadful – who demonstrate how trustees can behave. While I strive to be Ace in all I do, I could also recognise myself somewhere in between the two polarities – depending on what kind of day I'm having! But taking a hard look at yourself is part of the journey. Trustees need to be clear about what they are there for and figure out the ways of working with others to resolve differences and work through conflict. Recognising biases (conscious and unconscious), while creating safe spaces for discussion, dialogue and decision-making are some of the critical anchors to navigate the destructive battles that can occur in the boardroom.

Tesse Akpeki

Fellow of the Chartered Governance Institute

Organisational Health and Person-centred Consultant

Founder of the Wellbeing, Leadership and Resilience Leadership Initiative

Introduction

This is a book for trustees, written by a trustee. This is also a book for human beings, written by a human being. I've been involved in charity governance at one level or another for about 30 years. During that time I've seen some incredible governance and some that, let's be honest, was not of the standard one would hope. Over the years I've come to realise a number of things – firstly, no matter how well you understand the legalities and technicalities of being a trustee, it's the interpersonal relationships that usually cause the most (sometimes serious) problems. Secondly, it can be incredibly easy to forget that there is a human being behind the role 'trustee'. And thirdly, having effective systems and processes in place to support you when the 'people' bit gets difficult can often help you to avoid situations going wrong in the first place, or make it easier to handle them.

So, as you work your way through this book, you will find it is littered with real-life stories and experiences – both my own and ones I have heard from others. These serve as tips that will help you to avoid things going wrong, and practical examples and ideas to help make the role of trustee slightly easier to navigate.

But why else should you read this book? What gives me the right to talk about these issues? Well, I've been a trustee, a chair and a CEO. I've also mentored chairs and CEOs, and I've worked with boards to help them to get their governance right – from charities with turnovers in the multi millions to those with barely a kettle and a cup for resources. I co-founded the Small Charities Coalition, which subsequently merged with the Charity Trustees Networks, and therefore heard a lot about what trustees deal with. And, in fact, I owe a lot to the trustees who belonged to the Small Charities Coalition because they shared many of their stories with me, some of which I share with you in this book.

All of this means I know what it feels like to work alongside fellow trustees, try to lead them and have them lead me. And yes, there are some traumatised chairs and trustees out there who have had me as a colleague on their board. My years of experience and of trying to help others to get it right don't mean I've nailed it either! Just recently a fellow trustee confessed to me that she found me really intimidating and hard to challenge. I'm so glad she had the courage to tell me – I wouldn't have realised if she hadn't and I now know that this is something I need to work on.

Like most of you I want to be a good trustee. There have been times when I have achieved that and – I have to be honest – times when I really haven't. I remember an incident with a fellow trustee over the right way to word a policy on inclusivity in recruitment, which resulted in me behaving like a total cockwomble and not properly listening to their fears because I was so sure I was right. In the end, it turned out I was! But my reaction did not enhance my argument.

1 One of us is crying: the challenges of trusteeship

*The greatest of faults, I should say, is to be
conscious of none.* Thomas Carlyle

The chapter title is a line from ABBA's song 'One of Us'. And in this case it is highly likely to be the CEO who sobs into their pillow the night after a meeting of the board of trustees. Meanwhile, the trustee or trustees who caused the grief have probably already completely forgotten all about it and are going about the rest of their lives in blind oblivion to the wreck of a human being they left behind after the meeting. This chapter is about honest self-reflection on when and how things can go wrong and what part you, as a trustee, play.

Outcomes

After reading this chapter you will:

- **Know what people might be saying about you**
- **Understand how you can get things wrong**
- **Realise why trustees are important**

How does it go wrong?

This chapter isn't about when you get it right. This chapter is about the hard truths – the behaviours and attitudes trustees sometimes exhibit which can cause great damage to their charity and the ability of its executive team to get the job done. It's also about how easy it is to totally piss off your fellow trustees, often without having any inkling that this is what you've done.

Now, of course, you may well be a trustee of a very small charity that doesn't employ any staff, or at least very few. So some of the messages in this chapter may not apply directly to you. But there are probably some lessons here that will serve you nonetheless. And even if you already consider yourself to be an excellent trustee, consider this: you will never, ever be told by your CEO or executive team that you are not a good trustee. Even if you ask directly, there is not a cat in hell's chance they will tell you the whole unexpurgated truth. This will be because they're grateful for the very fact that you volunteer (because trustees aren't always that easy to get) and don't want to offend you, or because you don't respond well to criticism, or because they don't feel they have a strong enough relationship with you to be honest, or because they feel their role might be under threat if they say something negative, or even

because they just haven't got the time to have that sort of conversation with you, as it takes thought and preparation.

You are also highly unlikely to be given honest feedback by your fellow trustees, possibly for similar reasons. Many of the trustees who shared their stories with me (as explained in the introduction) admitted that they found it very difficult to give feedback directly to a fellow trustee whom they found challenging. Mostly they either just put up with the problem or relied on the chair to deal with it – which didn't always happen. And sometimes the trustees simply didn't know how to handle the situation with which they were presented. For example, one trustee discovered that the treasurer was having an affair with the finance director and had absolutely no clue how to handle such a sensitive situation. (For the curious, they didn't handle it – the situation finally got out because a member of staff spotted the couple canoodling before a meeting. The whole thing got very messy and ended with both the treasurer and the finance director resigning and two broken marriages.)

So it is quite likely that you will be under the impression that you're good at being a trustee. But it's entirely possible that, actually, you're not nearly as good as you think you are. Nevertheless, most of you of course really do care about getting it right and want to be an excellent trustee. This is because you know that the better you are, the better your charity will be.

What they say about you

When I gathered stories about being a trustee, there were two sorts of people who sent me information. Staff and volunteers at the charities concerned had plenty to say, and of course lots and lots of stories came from trustees talking about each other. This section shares with you some of the very frank views I heard from members of executive teams about trustees and their behaviour towards each other and towards staff and volunteers. And I suspect some of these statements will resonate with you as the themes they contain were very common. Do you know anyone like this? Is it you?!

I am so tired of having to explain the same thing over and over again because they haven't bothered to remind themselves of what we covered last time.

They always assume you've done something wrong.

The only time you ever get feedback on anything you send to them is if it's criticising something. No one ever says 'well done'. And even if they do, it always feels fake as if they feel they ought to say something positive but they don't really believe it.

All they care about is the money. Most of our board meetings they spend all their time hauling you over hot coals about the finances. It seems like they couldn't care less about our clients.

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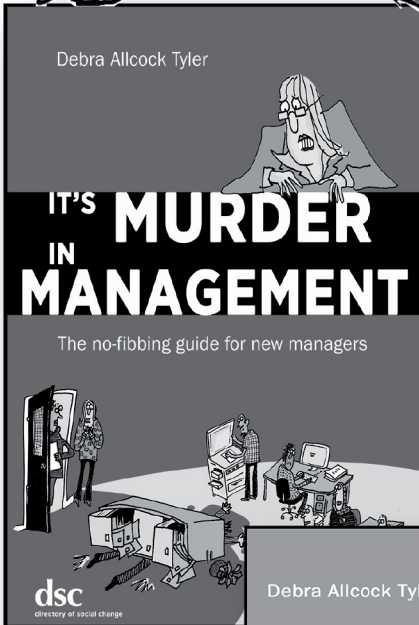
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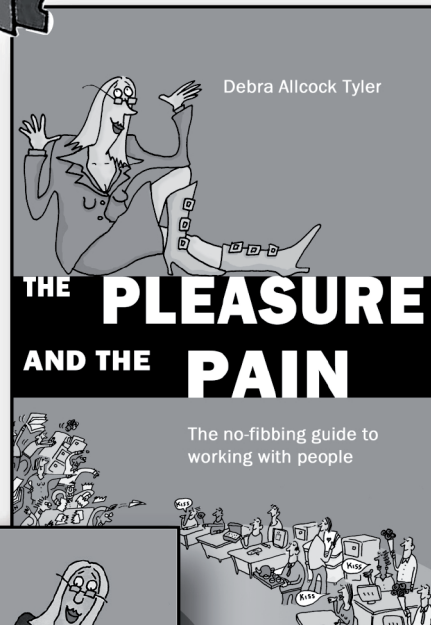
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