

Foreword for “How to be an even better chair”

By Julia Middleton, Chief Executive, Common Purpose

This book came about because many of us felt we were not chairing as well as we could or should.

Over the past eighteen months, groups of senior leaders have been gathering at an event Common Purpose runs called OpenGround, to talk about issues they feel passionate about and how they can support each other to make change happen. One of the big challenges they identified was how to improve the quality of chairing in the UK.

There is not enough diversity on boards, which can appear complacent and can cause opportunities and important angles to be missed. If more diverse boards are to succeed, they will demand better chairing. There is talent everywhere and we cannot afford to waste it just because someone does not look like a leader or act like all the others.

We who met through OpenGround and were concerned about the quality of chairing in the UK have been meeting over supper and exchanging wisdom and ideas for effective chairing. It's the ideas that came out of those conversations that form the basis of this book. My father always said, “Any fool can make things more complicated; it's the really talented people who make things simple.” And that's what I watched and heard through working with the many able chairs involved in this book.

What's the simple message? The best chairs are people who know that they exist to make sure their organisation is delivering to the people it has set out to serve. Not to support the CEO, not to represent the organisation, not to build partnerships with others, but to ensure they are delivering what it says “on the tin” to the people they serve. Things do seem to go wrong when chairs forget this.

The great chairs never forget the objective. They have a passion that is infectious, they don't duck the difficult questions or people, and perhaps most importantly, they are confident enough that they don't need to play status games with the CEO or other board members, with the staff, with the stakeholders or the swanks or the people who live in their housing or receive their care or learn in their institutions.

We all found existing models for chairing rather frustrating and unhelpful. And best practice guides often don't match the situation. The reality is that chairing is an enormous act of balancing and sometimes it gets out of kilter. That is when you need a “real practice guide” from people who have done it, learned from it, made the mistakes and are still trying to get the balance right.

Stories and conversations helped a lot. So this book is not intended to be the definitive guide to chairing. You must not read it for the full story on chairing. You will need other books for the rules, the codes, the structures and the systems. This is the book to read after you have read the others and you want to tap into the experience of chairs who have learned the hard way about chairing. We hope it will act as a springboard for you to begin your own conversations with other chairs about how chairs can make positive change happen.

Don't let this real practice guide put you off. It can be pretty daunting when you see all the pitfalls laid out, when you hear the types of mistakes even experienced chairs make and think how easy it would be to fail into that trap. But don't be put off. Go back to the objective of the organisation and remember why you are there as a chair: to deliver to

the people the organisation has been set up to serve. You hold a key to making sure people get decent health care, to challenging our schools to deliver the best education to our young people, helping refugees to settle and belong. These are real things to achieve, important things that touch and change others' lives, and that is a glorious thing to do, however tough.

Leadership can be a lonely task. Hopefully as you read this short book, you will feel slightly less out on a limb and remember that there are lots of us struggling to get chairing right. And those of you who are not yet chairing may be bettered prepared when you do.

Join the conversation. Share your chairing experiences by emailing to me at juliamiddleton@commonpurpose.org.uk and help to make boards all across the UK stronger and more effective.