


## CLIENT ADVICE SHEET



# 5 Rs Critical Engagement Framework for Effective Governance

### “Or How to Read Reports!”

#### Executive summary

Effective governance requires boards to engage critically with information presented to them; to evaluate it and come to a consensus. Matthew Clements-Wheeler (2003) suggests using a structured approach. He advocates a method which employs five lenses; each beginning with 'R' to help board members and stakeholders thoughtfully evaluate information:

- **Recognition:** What content aligns with your existing knowledge and experience?
- **Revelation:** What new insights or surprising information does the report provide?
- **Rejection:** Are there claims or findings you question or disagree with?
- **Reliability:** Are the conclusions dependable, well-supported, and would the analysis yield the same results under similar conditions if undertaken by someone else?
- **Relevance:** How does the report content directly align with or impact your organisation's strategic objectives?

The lenses support CST's Next Gen Governance concept of 'sense-making'; by using them systematically, governors, trustees, and other stakeholders can enhance their critical engagement, which will lead to boards making more strategic, better-informed, decisions.

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Lens	Purpose	Reflection
<b>RECOGNITION</b> 	Aligning Experience and Insight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What information/assertions confirm your existing understanding of this topic in the school/trust?</li> <li>Is there information which resonates with your own observations?</li> <li>Consider how this information aligns with your personal and professional experience.</li> </ul>
<b>REVELATION</b> 	Identifying Surprises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify new or unexpected information.</li> <li>Note surprising elements or insights previously unknown to you.</li> <li>How might these revelations shift your perspective or risk appetite?</li> </ul>
<b>REJECTION</b> 	Critical Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Critically assess findings or claims – are any questionable? Do any overstate the position? Is what's asserted consistent with previous reports?</li> <li>Flag assertions or conclusions you disagree with or doubt.</li> <li>Consider what evidence would clarify or resolve these disagreements.</li> </ul>
<b>RELIABILITY</b> 	Ensuring Dependability and Consistency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is this sufficient information upon which to agree action (or inaction)?</li> <li>Evaluate the thoroughness (no gaps/bias) and trustworthiness of the conclusions.</li> <li>Assess the 'repeatability': Would another informed professional reach the same conclusions as the author using the same data and methods?</li> <li>Consider what assumptions have been made. Reflect on where estimates or opinions may have been presented as facts.</li> </ul>
<b>RELEVANCE</b> 	Advancing Strategic Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is the matter something for detailed consideration by the board?</li> <li>Determine if there is direct alignment between the report's recommendations and your strategic goals.</li> <li>Assess how insights might influence strategic decision-making.</li> </ul>

Fig. 1 The 5 Rs Explained



## Introduction: The 5 Rs for Strategic Sense-making

In this guidance paper, we explore 'Matthew's Rs'<sup>1</sup> to help trustees and governors meaningfully engage with reports; moving their activities from compliance to strategic leadership.

RECOGNITION	REVELATION	REJECTION	RELIABILITY	RELEVANCE
				

Clements-Wheeler's 5 Rs framework<sup>2</sup> (Clements-Wheeler 2023) provides a helpful method for structured 'sense-making'<sup>3</sup>, which the Confederation of School Trusts (CST) identifies as a key leadership capability required to lead through complexity<sup>4</sup> (CST, 2025). Sense-making is the process boards use to comprehend complex situations and decide how to act. By creating a disciplined space for shared sense-making, the 5 Rs help boards harness the collective intelligence needed to test decisions from multiple angles and generate options that no individual could produce alone.

Fig. 1 sets out the five critical lenses boards can use to review information presented to them. They work effectively for written documents, presentations, and even as a way of analysing the contents of live discussion during meetings.

Clements-Wheeler reports that the simplicity of the framework has led to scepticism when it is first encountered by experienced board members. However he cites multiple examples of the framework being well received by non-profit organisations ranging from schools and academy trusts to heritage railway boards and professional membership bodies.

When used regularly and systematically, these lenses eventually become an integral part of a proficient board member's skillset. In fact, many governance volunteers may already demonstrate unconscious competence in these lenses; visible in the quality of reflection and questioning they bring to meetings. Surfacing that competence makes induction and training of new board members easier.

### Why the 5 Rs Matter for Next-Gen Governance

The 5 Rs matter because they offer a structured way to enhance board effectiveness and move toward more advanced, complex thinking which demonstrates:

<sup>1</sup> Yes, you do have to pronounce Matthew's Rs carefully! The pun is intended to support recall of the framework.

<sup>2</sup> Clements-Wheeler, M, (2023): Recipient Response Questions, Birmingham: Mastery, Clarity, Wisdom Ltd

<sup>3</sup> Sadeghi, S & Carman-Jones, D (2024): Next-gen governance. Nottingham: Confederation of School Trusts

<sup>4</sup> Discussion Paper Next-gen board leadership (2025): Nottingham: Confederation of School Trusts



- **Grounding and Authenticity:** The lenses do this by grounding discussions and enhancing the authenticity of the board's engagement in relation to their personal and collective experience.
- **Dynamism and Responsiveness:** They ensure decision-making is dynamic and responsive to new information and emerging factors, preventing strategic stagnation.
- **Critical Scrutiny:** They promote a 'speak up' culture, fostering balanced scrutiny by avoiding passive acceptance of information and encouraging the testing of key assumptions.
- **Robust Assurance:** By encouraging the comparison of evidence and methodology, they ensure that recommendations are robust, reliable, and less vulnerable to critique by confirming repeatability and trustworthiness.
- **Strategic Alignment:** They keep strategic planning and action aligned with informed, clear recommendations, anchoring the organisation to its core purpose and maintaining a clear line of sight between choices and mission.



## Deep Dive: The 5 Rs Framework in Practice

The 5 Rs framework offers a formalised process for collective sense-making and developing the board's 'Thought Architecture'<sup>5</sup>. This architecture is the structure of thought that frames how the board understands its environment and, ultimately, makes decisions.

We saw earlier (Fig.1) how board members can use the framework to reflect on the information they encounter. Now it's time to consider how that reflection might lead to questions which begin to assemble the knowledge and that reflection into the board's sense-making dialogue.

To do that, we will use Fee Stagg's ([SBW Governance](#)) question types<sup>6</sup>. She advises boards attempt to formulate questions which are curious, those which clarify and those which challenge.

On the following pages there are examples of these curious, clarifying and challenging questions which might readily arise from each R lens. They demonstrate how reflection can lead to better understanding of who is asserting what and where any gaps or misstatements may be. Explore the questions to understand how each lens scaffolds deliberation towards higher order, interconnected thinking.

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<sup>5</sup> Gilbride, N. (2025), *The challenges of teaching complexity sciences to novice learners in public administration*. Teaching Public Administration, Vol. 0(0) 1-14

<sup>6</sup> Stagg, F (2025), *The Great Big Governance Glossary 2025-2026*

## RECOGNITION

### ALIGNING EXPERIENCE AND INSIGHT

- ✓ Identify findings that resonate with your own observations.
- ✓ Highlight areas that confirm your existing understanding
- What previous trends or decisions, based on our history, do these findings seem to align with? (Curiosity)
- Could you elaborate on how this specific outcome relates to our established operational practices or governance precedents? (Clarification)
- I recognise themes/data/trends we've seen before. We've previously agreed X as a strategy. How is that strategy impacting the familiar issues we are seeing here? If it isn't, why might that be? (Challenge)

### PITFALLS

- Failure of the Recognition lens occurs when familiarity breeds complacency, leading to Confirmation Bias. Trustees only notice what is familiar, allowing their scrutiny to be compromised by pre-existing consensus or the use of well-worn tropes drawn from sector commentators and wider media.
- This stops discussion before it starts. The board neglects the critical step of triangulating sources, failing to demand a range of evidence or different perspectives to truly support an argument or recommendation.
- The result is a failure to properly scrutinise information, blocking the emergence of genuine, system-aware insights.

RECOGNITION	REVELATION	REJECTION	RELIABILITY	RELEVANCE
				

## REVELATION

### IDENTIFYING SURPRISES AND NEW INSIGHTS

- ✓ Note surprising elements or insights previously unknown to you.
- ✓ Reflect on how these revelations might shift your perspective or actions.
- What was the single most surprising finding for the management team, and why did it surprise them? (Curiosity)
- Could you clarify the root cause or source of this unexpected result? (Clarification)
- Why did our existing monitoring or reporting systems fail to anticipate this revelation, and what does that tell us about our current scope (Challenge)
- What alternative interpretations or system-wide implications might explain this surprising data? (Challenge)

### PITFALLS

- When new information is presented, the pitfall is Distracted Engagement. The board focuses undue attention on an interesting, novel, or surprising finding without first checking its strategic Relevance.
- Trustees may treat the unexpected as an isolated anomaly, or conversely, dedicate disproportionate time to an issue simply because it is new.
- This is a form of Minimising Complexity or a strategic distraction: the board wastes time chasing interesting tangents, failing to recognise that new or novel does not automatically mean relevant to the organisation's mission.

RECOGNITION	REVELATION	REJECTION	RELIABILITY	RELEVANCE
				

## REJECTION

### CRITICAL EVALUATION AND TESTING ASSUMPTIONS

- ✓ Highlight assertions or conclusions you disagree with or doubt.
- ✓ Consider what evidence would clarify or resolve these disagreements.
- What were the key assumptions made by the author or management when formulating this conclusion? (Curiosity)
- What specific evidence would clarify or resolve the areas where this report's findings appear inconsistent? (Curiosity)
- Please provide the specific, underlying evidence or data points that robustly support assertion 'Y' in the report. (Clarification)
- I am sceptical of finding 'X'; what counter-evidence or alternative perspectives were considered during the analysis? (Challenge)
- Why was this linear, standard framework applied here, rather than an approach that recognises the complexity of the problem? (Challenge)

### PITFALLS

- The Rejection lens presents two principle hazards. The first of these is lack of follow through if challenge is rebuffed. This occurs when a s member of the board asks a question and the executive response is accepted at face value - usually due to the power imbalance between lay board members and 'expert' executives. Such passive acceptance without follow up leads to the misapprehension that challenge has been undertaken.
- The opposite culture is also problematic when it becomes overly adversarial or critical. When challenge is constant, personal, and focused on finding fault rather than co-creating strategic clarity, it stifles productivity and creates an environment where management may withhold difficult but necessary information.
- In both scenarios, the result is a non-productive dynamic that fails to achieve balanced scrutiny.

#### RECOGNITION



#### REVELATION



#### REJECTION



#### RELIABILITY



#### RELEVANCE





## RELIABILITY (REPEATABILITY)

### ENSURING DEPENDABILITY AND CONSISTENCY

- ✓ Evaluate the thoroughness (no gaps/bias) and trustworthiness of the conclusions.
- ✓ Assess the 'Repeatability': Would another informed professional seeing the same things in our school/trust reach the same conclusions?
- How recently was the underlying data collected, and who verified its accuracy before it was presented to us? (Curiosity)
- What historical context or longer timeframes were considered when assessing this data? (Curiosity)
- Are other schools within/outside our trust experiencing this effect? (Curiosity)
- Could you explain the specific methodology used, and why that method was chosen over others for this analysis? (Clarification)
- What external input/advice have we had in this regard, was it consistent or did it vary? How? (Clarification)
- Is this conclusion reproducible? If we ran the same analysis next quarter, what variables might foreseeably lead to a different result? (Challenge)
- Given the qualitative/informal nature of some data used, what professional judgement was layered onto it to ensure its validity (Challenge)

### PITFALLS

- The main pitfall for reliability is analytical inertia. This occurs when the board over-relies on a narrow interpretation of data, focusing only on established trends or complete data sets. When presented with a single significant event, a differing opinion, or a minority viewpoint, the board demands further trend analysis or more data before acting.
- This represents a failure to use professional judgment: the board ignores the principle that the exceptional event or outlier can sometimes prove the point and should be an immediate catalyst for strategic board action, leading to unnecessary delay and risk exposure.

RECOGNITION	REVELATION	REJECTION	RELIABILITY	RELEVANCE
				





## RELEVANCE

### ADVANCING STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES AND FILTERING FOCUS

- ✓ Determine the direct alignment between the report's recommendations and your strategic goals.
- ✓ Assess how insights might influence strategic decision-making.
- What led you to decide this is now a board issue? (Curiosity)
- Are other schools/trusts either innovating in this area or struggling with this issue? (Curiosity)
- Can we discuss which of the organisation's current strategic objectives this report directly addresses and advances? (Clarification)
- If we adopt this recommendation, what critical strategic priority will we need to de-prioritise or postpone due to resource allocation? (Clarification)
- What is the immediate and long-term impact of this recommendation on our beneficiaries or stakeholders? (Clarification)
- How many of our pupils/staff/volunteers/schools are impacted by this and over what period? (Clarification)
- How does this recommendation align with our stated risk appetite for this area of work? (Clarification)
- Is the strategic benefit (relevance) of this item high enough to warrant the board's time, or is it better suited for delegation to a committee? (Challenge)
- Would it be beneficial, either operationally or strategically, if the board confirmed this is not a priority? (Challenge)

### PITFALLS

- The most common pitfall for the relevance lens is abdication of responsibility masquerading as strategic disengagement – when a board correctly focuses on high-level strategy but incorrectly ignores all operational detail. Boards remain accountable for ensuring the smaller stuff or operational compliance controls are in place; they cannot simply wish them away.
- The failure to ensure effective delegation arrangements are clearly in place and monitored to handle those essential compliance items, risking strategic oversight by ignoring the mechanisms of assurance. The efficacy of such mechanisms is highly relevant to a board and its committees.

RECOGNITION	REVELATION	REJECTION	RELIABILITY	RELEVANCE
				



## Lenses to Help Your Board See Clearly - Guidance for Board Chairs

We know that every Chair plays a pivotal role in shaping board culture. It can be hard for a new Chair knowing quite where to start. These thoughts are designed to help get that improvement journey underway, beginning to embed a more thought-rich culture without creating a burdensome checklist.

RECOGNITION	REVELATION	REJECTION	RELIABILITY	RELEVANCE
				

### 1. Focus on Intent: Embedding the 5 Rs into Sense-making

The Chair can use the framework as a tool to structure the board's collective sense-making process, not as a rigid, sequential checklist.

- **Pre-Meeting Focus (Triage):** Encourage the board to pre-submit no more than two questions, tagged with one of the 5 Rs (e.g., "Rejection Q: page 4"). This helps the Chair gauge the contentious areas and potential blind spots before the meeting.
- **Thematic Grouping:** Instead of discussing the report in order, the Chair might group discussion points by the 'R' lenses to ensure all critical angles are covered:
  - *"Let's start with Recognition & Revelation. Where did the report confirm our views, and what new insights surprised us? Is this revelation an emergent trend?"*
  - *"Now, let's move to Rejection & Reliability. Are there any claims or data points we need to challenge before moving forward? Are the conclusions reproducible?"*
  - *"Finally, we'll focus on Relevance. How does this align with our strategic plan for the next six months?"*
- When a board member asks a question, the Chair can strategically intervene to ensure a disciplined progression of inquiry, moving beyond simple curiosity to deep challenge:
  - Chair's Prompt: *"That's a great curiosity question, [Board Member Name]. Could you follow up with a clarification question for the presenter?"*
  - Chair's Intervention: *"Thank you. Now, based on that clarification, what is the core challenge for us as a board which we must address before moving on?"*

## 2. Time Management & Strategic Filtering (The Relevance Imperative)

The Chair needs to champion the use of the Relevance lens as a primary strategic filter to maximise meeting efficiency and combat Operational Drift.

Strategy	Actionable Chair Questions	Rationale
Relevance Triage	<i>"In one sentence, how does this report advance or impact our strategic objectives?"</i>	Forces the executive to state the relevance up front, quickly filtering low-value items and eliminating 'fluffload'.
Time Allocation by R	<i>"This is a low-relevance compliance update; we have five minutes for clarification questions before moving to the next item."</i>	Allocates time based on the item's strategic risk and importance. Allot more time to rejection and reliability for critical strategy papers.
Parking Lot for Deep Dives	<i>"The reliability methodology debate is too detailed for the full board. [Board Member X], please join the Finance Committee to follow up and report back on assurance."</i>	Manages complexity by 'parking' issues. Ensures the board doesn't get mired in operational detail but delegates assurance mechanisms .
Chair's Intervention	<i>"We've spent a lot of time on recognition; I'd like to quickly turn our attention to relevance now. What are the key strategic takeaways from this report?"</i>	Ensures the board addresses all lenses and keeps the discussion future-oriented, avoiding focusing narrowly on immediate or recent aspects.

## 3. Using the Lenses for Governance Improvement

The 5 Rs framework is not just for reports; it is a useful tool for board development, induction, and self-review, aligning with the CST's call for boards to adopt a more nuanced and holistic approach to their own effectiveness.

### A. New Board Member Induction

Use the 5 Rs to provide scaffolding for new governance volunteers, aiding their comprehension and reducing cognitive load:

- **Instructional Focus:** Frame pre-reading tasks by assigning one R to a new member. For example: "For the Finance Report, please focus your pre-reading on Reliability and prepare one Challenge question related to data integrity."
- **Reflection Pairing:** Pair a new trustee with an experienced one to discuss a report using the R lenses, moving the new member from basic understanding to critical analysis.

## B. Influencing Board Self-Review Activities

The exemplification and pitfall warnings for the 5 Rs provide a common language for board self-assessment, allowing the board to address its behavioural competencies and 'Thought Architecture' directly.

- Incorporate the pitfalls into your annual self-review or development discussions:
  - *Assessing how we respond when presented with assertions we recognise:* "How effectively do we triangulate sources, or do we rely too heavily on well-worn tropes from the sector?"
  - *Assessing rejections:* "To what extent is our rejection of an idea or proposal driven by healthy scrutiny, versus contributing to an overly adversarial or critical board culture?"
  - *Assessing the extent to which we check the reliability of information presented:* "Are we sometimes guilty of analytical inertia - demanding more data when a single exceptional event should be enough to trigger immediate action?"
- Culture Check: Use the rejection lens to check for an imbalance of power dynamics, ensuring the board maintains a 'speak up' culture where dissent is tolerated and encouraged.

Ultimately, the advice throughout this briefing is about shifting the board culture from passive reception to active, critical engagement, moving the board toward better governance. Chairs cannot do that on their own and will need the consent, engagement and encouragement of their board.

## Theoretical Considerations (Optional Additional Reading)

We have included Appendix A: Theoretical Considerations for readers interested in discovering more information about how the five lenses link to the principles of Next-Gen Governance and some of the theories about cognitive load and creation of the correct conditions for group learning.

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## Further Support

If you'd like an external perspective on governance in your setting or want an experienced professional to provide additional capacity to support an improvement project, my team at Mastery | Clarity | Wisdom can help.

We offer interim leadership support, along with problem solving sessions, and long-term coaching for board chairs, CEOs and governance professionals. We also offer wider board development sessions, independent governance reviews and internal scrutiny.

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## Appendix A: Theoretical Considerations



### Embracing Complexity and Collective Intelligence

Expressed in more theoretical terms, the 5 Rs framework encourages the board to move beyond linear, reductionist thinking (approve this report, sign off that policy) toward recognising complexity and interconnectedness. Since complex problems in education lack a single obvious solution, the board must become comfortable with ambiguity and equipped to lead through uncertainty.

By working systematically through the lenses, the board operates as a learning community that fosters and benefits from collective intelligence. The create a culture which is more likely to:

- see patterns and tolerate ambiguity
- challenge assumptions and generate options that no individual could produce alone.
- appreciate the wider historical context of issues
- disagree productively.

This disciplined process elevates the board's engagement, ensuring that the basis for decisions is tested from multiple angles before they shape strategy, allocate resources, or set risk appetite.

### Role of the 5Rs in Reducing Cognitive Load for Strategic Focus

The framework is designed to reduce cognitive load by permitting governance volunteers to interpret new information in a scaffolded way. This process integrates new data with their existing mental schema:

1. First, recognition of what's familiar, which grounds the discussion.
2. Second, revelation of new knowledge, which challenges the status quo.
3. Third, rejection and reliability analysis, which scrutinises the information critically.
4. Finally, relevance assessment, which decides whether to apply the information or to discard it according to organisational priorities and external factors operating on the organisation.

## Applying Salmon's Five-Stage (E-Moderation) Model

Given that so many governance activities) take place digitally these days, via Teams, GovernorHub, Whatsapp and online surveys and polls both synchronously and asynchronously, there is a need to considering whether the 5Rs can be explained/justified via an appropriate theoretical model.

We suggest that Gilly Salmon's Five-Stage Model<sup>7</sup> helps understand how the 5Rs support group learning. It's a framework for e-moderation in online learning, focusing on building social and cognitive engagement. Your 5 Rs framework exhibits a similar, hierarchical progression from basic access to deep knowledge construction.

5 Rs Lens	Salmon's Stage	Application / Exhibition in a Board Context
<b>Recognition (R1)</b>	Access & Motivation (Stage 1)	The report is accessed, and trustees find familiar anchor points that align with their existing knowledge, providing initial motivation to engage. This establishes the necessary 'comfort zone' before tackling complexity.
<b>Revelation (R2)</b>	Socialisation (Stage 2)	New, surprising insights become the focus of initial peer-to-peer discussion. Trustees share diverse perspectives on the new information, moving beyond individual reading to collective sense-making.
<b>Rejection (R3)</b>	Information Exchange (Stage 3)	The "Rejection" lens formalises the necessary information exchange, moving from simple sharing to critical questioning. Trustees use Curiosity, Clarification, and Challenge (CCC) to elicit evidence and resolve disagreements.
<b>Reliability (R4)</b>	Knowledge Construction (Stage 4)	The board collectively scrutinises the methodology, data integrity, and assumptions underlying the report. This stage ensures the "constructed knowledge" is robust, reliable, and reproducible, leading to consensus on facts.
<b>Relevance (R5)</b>	Development (Stage 5)	The board integrates the validated findings (the new knowledge) into strategic action. This is the highest level of learning, where insights influence future decisions and track progress against strategic outcomes.

This alignment shows the 5 Rs are not just a static checklist but a structured, progressive journey for the board as a learning community.

<sup>7</sup> Salmon, G, <https://www.gillysalmon.com/five-stage-model.html>, accessed 5/11/2025