

## CLIENT ADVICE SHEET



# Is Your Board Focusing on the Right Things?

Governance culture is the foundation of an effective board. Strong policies and structures mean little if trustees and senior leaders don't work well together. Culture shapes how boards make decisions, handle conflict, and hold leadership accountable.

This guide provides practical tips to assess and improve governance culture in academy trusts, schools, and non-profits.



### Tip 1: Assess Your Current Board Culture

Do you really know how the members of your board feel? Do you feel comfortable with the culture and confident the board is on-task, prioritising the right issues at all times? What do your fellow board members think? Remember, even on high performing boards, there can be times when some members feel uncomfortable. So, before making changes, evaluate how your board operates.

At your next meeting, ask board members questions like those listed here.

Use the table below to dive deeper into people's views about the prevailing culture.

#### Culture Questions

- Are discussions open, **transparent**, and **constructive**?
- Do **all members contribute**, or do a few dominate?
- Is there a **culture of challenge**, or do people avoid difficult conversations?
- Are board meetings **focused on strategy**, or lost in operational detail?

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To dive deeper, circulate this table to all board members and officers in attendance during the meeting and ask them to quickly complete it:

Tick to show your assessment of the following statements (1 = Never, 5 = Always):	1	2	3	4	5
Board members feel safe to express concerns.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The board actively reviews its own effectiveness.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Board discussions align with strategic goals.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Decision-making is clear and accountable.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Meetings are well run.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- Ask the Clerk to collate the results and feed them back to the group.
- Ask participants if their answers would change if they are answering for just themselves alone, e.g.

	1	2
<b>I personally</b> feel safe to express concerns.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>I have participated</b> in a review of this board's effectiveness.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>I'm certain</b> board discussions align with strategic goals.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>I fully understand</b> what <b>decisions</b> we make, who will carry them out and by when. <b>I hold people to account</b> for those decisions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>In my personal opinion</b> meetings are well run.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Discuss any differences/similarities in participants answers.



## Tip 2: Strengthen Trust & Psychological Safety

Boards function best when trustees feel comfortable sharing ideas without fear.

### Practical steps:

- ☒ Hold informal pre-meeting discussions to build relationships.
- ☒ Encourage board chairs to invite quieter members into discussions.
- ☒ Set clear expectations around respectful challenge and debate.



### Tip 3: Embed Challenge & Constructive Debate

Good governance isn't about agreeing all the time—it's about making the best decisions. Challenge should be encouraged, not feared.

#### Practical steps:

- ☒ Assign a 'Devil's Advocate' role in discussions to test assumptions.
- ☒ Use anonymous voting or surveys to gauge honest opinions.
- ☒ Train board members in 'inquiry-led' questioning techniques.



### Step 4: Ensure Board Diversity & Representation

Diverse boards make better decisions. A range of experiences, skills, and perspectives prevents groupthink.

#### Practical Tips:

- ☒ Map your current board's skills and perspectives—where are the gaps?
- ☒ Use targeted recruitment to attract a broader range of expertise.
- ☒ Regularly review board composition to keep it fit for purpose.



### Step 5: Commit to Continuous Improvement

Culture isn't fixed - it evolves. Strong boards prioritise self-assessment and development.

#### Practical Tips:

- ☒ Conduct annual board effectiveness reviews with honest feedback.
- ☒ Schedule governance training and coaching to build capability.
- ☒ Celebrate governance successes—highlight where culture improvements have led to better decisions.





## Further Support

Strong governance doesn't happen by accident; it requires deliberate effort, training, and regular review. If you'd like an external perspective on how your board can improve its culture, become more strategic and boost its effectiveness, then my team at Mastery | Clarity | Wisdom can help.

We offer board development sessions, independent governance reviews and long-term coaching for board chairs, CEOs and governance professionals.

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