

**ACE and ACEVO Seminar
Leading in uncertain times**

Event summary

We were delighted to host our first event after the summer break on the theme of “Leading in Uncertain Times”, hosted in partnership with Association of Chief Executives for Voluntary Organisations, (ACEVO), the network for leaders of charities and social enterprises. The event was an opportunity to explore common themes and challenges across leadership in voluntary and government bodies, to share insights and ideas – and make new connections – in a world where cross-sector partnerships are key to successful service delivery.

The seminar, led by our Chair, John Alty, began with reflections from key speakers Amanda Spielman, Chair, Ofqual, and Jane Hatfield, Chief Executive, Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare, representing each sector. They shared their experiences of leading and managing change within their organisations. Their contributions were followed by an interactive discussion about current leadership priorities and challenges facing Chief Executives; how these may compare across the sectors; and how ACEVO and ACE members might work together in the future.

Sharon Allen, ACEVO Vice Chair, closed the session, emphasising that networking events like this are vital to understanding the challenges across sectors. She saw the key themes of the discussion as 3 Ps: purpose, passion and pace.





Amanda Spielman, Chair, Ofqual

Amanda began discussing her experience in her role as Chair of Ofqual for five years, and her forthcoming role at Ofsted starting in January. She noted that education is a highly political space: the exam system has high levels of critical feedback where there will always be expectations that cannot be met. Amanda added that she felt it was necessary to ensure that there is clarity with the Secretary of State, civil servants and senior advisors about your organisation's purpose.

Closely related, Amanda felt that for non-ministerial departments like Ofqual, that are independent, the Chair needs to be clear about what that independence means. She said one of the hardest things to sustain over five years was preventing the creep of people challenging that independence bit by bit. Clarity of purpose and rationale for unpopular decisions has also been vital. A clear purpose helps here as well – for example, Ofqual delayed a number of GCSEs for a year, an unpopular decision with some, but the organisation provided a clear rationale and purpose, demonstrating it was the right outcome for the system

Building in feedback was another focus as Chair because organisations can naturally become inward-looking. Ofqual had to put effort into developing opportunities for feedback in order to understand stakeholder's perceptions. Dealing with perceptions as well as the substance of a problem had been equally important for building relationships.

Some additional points:

- Recognising what you cannot control is important – for example, a couple of key stakeholders who do not listen to evidence.
- Governments can struggle with the idea of boards. There is a flow of responsibility through boards and through accounting officers, and there can be a tension between the two. The sponsoring department may favour the accounting officer because they may be able to achieve greater leverage.
- The successor to the triennial review programme – cross-sector reviews – should give arm's length bodies a louder voice together.

Jane Hatfield, Chief Executive, Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare,

Jane began by talking about the value of peer learning. She went on to draw from her own recent experience of leading in uncertain times, having been appointed to modernise the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare within 12 months. The role was then made permanent and she has been at the organisation for three years, having decided to stay for the larger challenge of implementing the changes she had recommended. She noted the importance of pacing yourself physically, mentally and emotionally.



Jane described how she developed communication between groups of staff and gave them opportunities to take the initiative. She realised she needed to be visible – staff need to trust leadership during uncertain times.

As a result, Jane has seen the organisation undergo a complete culture change. Staff have appreciated the opportunity to take the initiative and there is significantly less unexplained absence and sickness leave. It was important to Jane to never put saving money as a goal to the staff because she did not want them to be worried about job security. However, the organisation has saved money as a result of the changes implemented. It was also important to be open to criticism and be able to make changes as a result of that criticism.

Jane observed how in uncertain times we often turn inwards to protect ourselves, even though times of change are exactly when we should be looking outward and innovating. Her key words are resilience and optimism.

Jane closed by emphasising the importance of sectors working and learning together, in particular understanding the pressures of each sector. Her own previous experience of moving from a small charity to commissioning health services in the NHS demonstrated to her the difference in perspectives and how little understood the public sector was by parts of the voluntary sector. She concluded that it never benefits service users to set one sector against the other.

Key points from the Q&A

- Significant effort has to be put into creating positive feedback loops
- Amanda created senior post in communications - not junior staff responding to specific projects but senior members coming to the boards as integrated part of the organisation
- When judging pace, it's important to make objectives, prioritisation and timelines explicit
- Staff need to feel they can say when CEOs are thinking too big
- A 1 year plan and 5 year plan should be proactive not reactive



- Passion is important to both sectors and needs to be channelled the right way
- When looking at your external profile take time to reflect on your brand, image and purpose
- Focusing on efficiency and processes will lead to money saving
- The external and internal development of the organisation need to be balanced

Themes from group discussion

1. Managing change and engaging with the passion of our staff

- Reflecting on how much uncertainty we share with the team to engage creativity
- Considering whether change is easier with a burning platform
- Conversations often began focused on finance but kept leading back to people and culture within organisations
- Dealing with how people in organisations respond to change
- Challenge of pace
- Vital to have strong relationship between CEO and Chair
- Engage staff to innovate and think for themselves

2. Stakeholder engagement

- Constant need to negotiate/renegotiate roles/license to operate and communication to stakeholders

3. Drivers of change

- Some differences between organisations e.g. constituents, levels of departmental control, different board set ups – but also similarities e.g. budgets vs. passion, skills, government relations, difficulties getting trustees and executive board members of quality and the right skills
- Is your organisation achieving its objectives? Thinking about purpose/reason to persist

4. Next steps

- More interactive workshops/sharing stories
- Regional events – or by sector/size/age and stage of organisations.
- Opportunities for shadowing
- Themed events coming out of the word cloud
- How could we get a better idea of each other's landscapes?
- Learning opportunities and group networks

