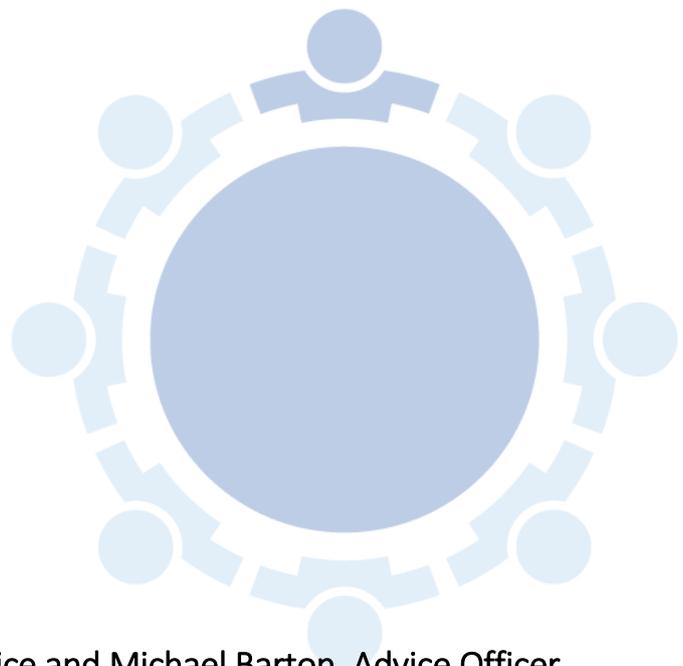


# Creating the right dynamic: A guide to help governing boards work effectively as a team



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## National Governance Association

The National Governance Association (NGA) is the membership organisation for governors, trustees and clerks of state schools in England.

We are an independent, not-for-profit charity that aims to improve the educational standards and wellbeing of young people by increasing the effectiveness of governing boards and promoting high standards. We are expert leaders in school governance, providing information, advice and guidance, professional development and e-learning.

We represent the views of governors, trustees and clerks at a national level and work closely with, and lobby, UK government and educational bodies.

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## Introduction

This guide, which is in four parts, is intended to support governing boards to work effectively as a team through a greater appreciation of how individuals with different roles and personality types work together towards a common purpose. It refers to the factors that can affect the dynamics of a board and suggests approaches for creating an effective team dynamic.

Part four of the guide gives advice on dealing with tension or conflict when it arises on the governing board.

We recommend that the guide is read alongside the NGA model [Code of Conduct](#) for governing boards and the document “[What governing boards and school leaders should expect of each other](#)” that is produced jointly by NGA and national professional organisations.

### ***The dynamics of a governing board – why it matters***

The ICSA study text on Boardroom Dynamics explains that a dynamic is fundamentally about how people and groups relate to each other and how things actually play out rather than what is supposed to happen on paper. School governing boards, academy trust boards and academy committees may find themselves in situations that play out differently to that which is expected due to a lack of clarity or collective purpose, or because they don't know understand each other well enough to collaborate in the most effective and beneficial way. This can impact upon the efficient conduct of business and create tension between individuals.

An effective team dynamic therefore isn't about avoiding differences between all those involved with governance. On the contrary “group think” should be avoided. A healthy team dynamic is one where individuals are both supported and challenged to contribute to the best of their ability, are organised and are motivated to do so because they feel part of something bigger than themselves. Also they should feel that they are valued, respected and listened to by their colleagues even when they disagree with them.

### ***Further support available***

NGA offers a [face to face training session](#) for governing boards on building working relationships and ensuring that your board is as effective as it can be.

NGA consultancy offers [a range of consultancy support](#) for governing boards, varying the approach according to the individual requirements of your school organisation. Our team of consultants are recruited, trained and quality assured to provide bespoke, quality evaluation, support and advice, whether it be a full external review of governance of your MAT, academy trust or school governing board, or bespoke training for your school or trust.

NGA Learning Link offers [flexible e-learning](#) to help governors, trustees, chairs and clerks develop their governance skills and knowledge. E-learning topics include the key functions of the governing board and handling difficult situations.



## Part 1: What influences the team dynamic of a governing board?

Being aware of and having open discussions about those factors which influence the team dynamic of the governing board can make a real difference to the quality of governance overall. Such things as:

**Engagement and willingness to share the workload:** Governing at a school or in a trust is not a role to be taken lightly. The average time commitment is five to eight hours per month (for meetings, background reading and school visits), although it will vary depending on the needs of the school/trust and the role. There are implications for the governing board if this is not understood or adhered to by every member. Governors/trustees that attend meetings sporadically, do not engage or commit to sharing the workload with their colleagues may affect the team dynamic, how business is conducted and working relationships.

**A willingness to accept and work with different personality types:** There is no agreed definition of a personality but it is true that we all have one and that it influences our relationships, how we view others and interact with them. Exploring the different personality types in your governing team is a useful (group) development activity that encourages reflection on how meetings are conducted, views are sought, and decisions are made and carried out. There are a range of tools (questionnaires etc.) that are freely available on-line and which can be used as part of an activity.

**Empathy:** The team dynamic and working relationships will be stronger when there is empathy (an understanding and appreciation of individual circumstances and experience) between members of the board and those with whom they work. Things that may seem relatively minor are actually really important and make a difference when it comes to making people feel valued. Like, for example, noting how long school leaders and staff have to stay on at school to attend governing board meetings, how comfortable the meeting environment is for volunteers who have been at work all day, the childcare and travelling commitments that members of the governing board might have.

**When members of the governing board have a different understanding of their role and purpose:** School Governance is a complex activity. Whilst the core functions of the board (strategic vision; holding senior leaders to account; financial scrutiny) are set out clearly in legislation and guidance, the distinction between what is strategic and what is operational and between support and challenge are not so clear in practice. It is not surprising therefore that there can be different interpretations of what the governing board is there to do and how it should be done. This is compounded further if members of the governing board interpret their own roles differently, or as being different. The most quoted example of this are governors/trustees who are elected/appointed to be representative of a specific stakeholder group (e.g. parents or staff) and therefore perceiving themselves to be the representatives of that stakeholder group tasked with bringing the “issues” of that group to the board. On a more subtle level the “other” relationship that the governor/trustee has with the school (parent or employee) may test their impartiality and lead to them holding back in meetings, which in turn can affect the dynamic and lead to other voices becoming dominant. The most direct and probably effective ways of building a clear, collective understanding of roles and responsibilities is through ensuring that induction takes place both to the board and to school or trust governance.

NGA believes that induction training should be mandatory for all new governors and trustees. This training need not be identical for all recruits although there is real value in providing induction/induction refresher



training for the board as a whole. Regardless, as a minimum induction training must ensure governors have a clear understanding of what governance is.

**The governing structure:** The governing structure informs and delegates responsibilities, working roles and relationship, and channel of communication. If the structure is not understood or utilised correctly by those governing within it, then the team dynamic is likely to be disrupted to the extent that it affects discussion at meetings, impedes decision making and undermines trust. Whether the governing board is in a maintained school or a trust., or is the academy committee of a school in a MAT, the time invested in developing, maintaining and explaining to those governing the constitution, terms of reference and/or scheme of delegation will help provide the clarity of purpose that all teams need in order to be effective.

**When members of the governing board have perceived and actual conflicts of interests:** A conflict of interest occurs where a governor or trustee's personal interests could potentially conflict with their duty to act in the best interests of their school or trust. They are not restricted to those issues that governors and trustees declare on the register of interests that is published on their school's or trust's website (directorships, partnerships, employment, personal relationships etc.) but for example, include issues where a perceived loyalty might impact on objective decision making. Governors and trustees are also obliged to declare any potential conflicts of interest during meetings and there should be an opportunity for them to do this. Conflicts of interest are likely to affect the team dynamic of the board if individuals interpret them differently. If they are not dealt with and challenged in an open or transparent way then they are going to inhibit open discussion and undermine the decision making process. The advice therefore is that governors/ trustees not only declare their own interests as they are required to, but also speak up if they believe that a conflict of interest is not being acknowledged. Doing this brings the matter out in to the open and allows the board to decide on the best course of action. Adopting a policy or policy statement that makes it clear that conflicts of interest are decided and managed in the same way helps to re-enforce this and avoid the issue being perceived as personal.

**The relationship between the governing board and the senior executive leader:** The working relationship between the governing board and the school or trust's leader is crucial in any setting. The ideal relationships is one that sees the governing board and executive leaders working alongside each other as genuine partners. When this happens in a climate of mutual respect and trust it allows for a more equitable contribution towards the governance of the school or trust. The team dynamic, scrutiny and decision making processes are weakened if the governing board assumes the role of "sleeping partners" or the "leader's fan club" therefore allowing the executive leader to have a disproportionate influence in meetings effectively managing the governing board. Equally damaging is when the board assumes the role of the "hostile witness" placing school leaders under undue pressure and undermining their confidence. Openly discussing the working relationship and how it is perceived by those involved can only help to strengthen it and the team dynamic of the governing board. For more on this refer to the document "[What governing boards and school leaders should expect of each other](#)".

**Leadership at board level:** If the chair of the governing board leads by example, models efficient business management, professional behaviour and an inclusive approach, then it is more likely that the rest of the board will follow suit. This should then lead to a cohesive, productive governing board and an effective team dynamic. If this strategy does not work, an effective chair will address the issue that is preventing a positive dynamic developing. Many chairs (or vice chairs) are now actively managing their boards with an annual conversation with each member to not only ensure that the team is developing well but as an opportunity to show appreciation for their contribution to the work of the board.



**The clerk to the governing board:** Having a confident and efficient clerk who knows the rules, procedures and what needs to be done, helps to strengthen the team dynamic by instilling confidence and modelling professional behaviour to the governing board. Conversely a clerk who does not have the skills or confidence to support the governing board and bring professional authority, will compound the lack of clarity that often creates tension between individuals. Effective boards actively manage their clerks, ensuring that they have access to training and development, are appraised annually and are paid properly for their services.

## Part 2: Creating an effective “team” dynamic

Every governing board has its own context and there is no definitive approach towards creating an effective “team” dynamic. However a combination of the following is more likely to build positive working relationships, effective practice and decision making processes

**Embrace diversity:** The most effective and dynamic governance comes from having a diverse range of background, experience and perspectives around the governing table, including those that identify with the community that is served by the school and or trust. Whilst this may challenge those who are more comfortable with homogenous groups where conflicting views are rare, it does not serve the governing board well or create the right dynamic to have too narrow a collective view. NGA’s [Everyone on Board campaign](#) encourages governing boards to adopt recruitment practices that embrace diversity, although it does recognise the challenge of recruiting governors and trustees in some settings.

**Use the governing board’s vision and strategic priorities to build a collective focus:** Governors and trustees rarely volunteer to be involved in compliance activity, an Ofsted inspection or to study reams of data. They get involved to make a difference. Take every opportunity as a governing team to revisit your vision and key priorities. What are you trying to achieve for your pupils? What do you want them to achieve and why? This is the way to build collective focus and a unified spirit.

**Use the governing boards’ guiding principles to reinforce its moral purpose:** Sometimes the pressures that governors/trustees and school leaders feel and are put under to use their power and influence for the good of children and young people, can make it difficult to see the right way to act, both generally and towards each other. As public servants those governing are bound by the Nolan Principles – selflessness; integrity; objectivity; accountability; openness; honesty; leadership. These principles have been in place for some time and are the bedrock of the governing board’s code of conduct. However, they are rarely discussed openly by governors and trustees. The same can be said for ethics and how the board keeps hold of its moral purpose at all times and through challenges. *The Framework for Ethical Leadership*, which was launched in 2019, convey what the Nolan principle of leadership means for schools and trusts which serve children and young people.

A pathfinder’s programme is available to support governors/trustees and school/trust leaders in instilling the values and virtues of the *Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education* into working practices and leadership styles.



**Clarifying expectations:** The most direct way for a governing board to clarify expectations of those governing is through a [code of conduct](#). The governing board should discuss their code of conduct prior to its adoption and so encourage collective ownership of it. In practice, the first meeting of the autumn term would be the ideal time to do this. NGA have produced a [model code](#), which should be tailored to fit the specific governance structure.

**Utilise the governing board's skills and experience:** Effective governance requires a governing board to have a range of skills that contribute towards asking good questions and making sound decisions. Deploying skills and experience in the right way and playing to individual strengths improves the team dynamic and helps to embed a sense of purpose and energy that runs through the whole governing board. Consider this when you are delegating functions, allocating tasks and assigning responsibility roles.

**Learn as individuals and together as a team:** Learning develops understanding, gives clarity and encourages empathy - these are all things that help to create an effective team dynamic. Induction provides a platform for further learning, which individual governors, trustees and those new to school or trust leadership can engage with in ways that suit them, whether it be e-learning, face-to-face training or studying materials. At the same time governing boards can benefit from shared learning experiences that can serve the dual purpose of providing knowledge and contribute towards team building. NGA provides a range of training and consultancy options that support this.

**Informal team building – getting to know one another:** The reality is that members of the governing board are likely only to see each other occasionally during the year and then it will be in business mode. Making time for informal engagement through a school occasion, a meal out etc. contributes towards the team dynamic as individuals get to know one another better, building an understanding of their colleagues' motivation for governing and become comfortable in each other's company.

**Support, encourage and celebrate success together:** Most people respond well to encouragement and support - it makes them feel valued. Therefore it is important not to overlook opportunities to recognise the individual contribution of governing board members and to celebrate what the governing board as a whole is achieving.

### Part 3: Dealing with tension or conflict when it arises on the governing board

Despite the best intentions issues can occur which give rise to tension or cause conflict on the governing board. Ignoring these issues is rarely the best option but it is best for the governing board to take a measured and conciliatory approach, which takes the following into account.

**Who is best placed to discuss the issue:** The most appropriate person in terms of role and seniority may not necessarily be the best personality or be the best placed to give a challenging message or lead difficult conversation. Bearing this in mind increases the prospect of a successful resolution or outcome. In some cases it may be useful to involve an outside party (e.g. local authority officer or external governance professional) to act as a mediator or to help re-set relationships.



**When and where to discuss the issue:** Usually a one to one or small group conversation is the better option and this approach should be considered as the starting point even when there is potential for the issue to escalate into a formal process that the governing board has to consider and vote upon. If possible avoid responding to the issue immediately. It is often better to let things settle and avoid a “knee jerk” reaction, take time to consider your options and to check your thinking with a trusted colleague. Whilst it is usually sensible to follow the conversation up with a brief email that confirms the key points and agreed actions, it is best to avoid lengthy exchanges that can be misinterpreted and exacerbate the issue.

**Ways to avoid the issue becoming personal:** The aim should be for any issue of personal conduct, approach and/or behaviour that falls below the standards expected, particularly if this has impacted upon others and the “team” dynamic, to be addressed in a way which is both clear and direct, but calm and kind in manner. Such conversations are always difficult and even more so if the individual or individuals concerned feels threatened, unjustly treated or unfairly characterised. By adopting the right tone and use of language it is possible to avoid the issue becoming personal. Make it clear from the outset that the issue is about how the governing board interacts as a team, rather than how individuals on that team view each other. Ask how can “we” resolve this rather than request that “you” do something about it.

**The way you want the issue to be discussed:** This is determined to a large extent by the context and the issues concerned. However it is more likely to yield a positive outcome if everyone involved feels that they have had an opportunity to put their views forward and that they have been listened to. Therefore it is important not to focus solely on the message that needs to be given and avoid an approach that is too “scripted.”

#### **Part 4: Taking formal action in order to protect the “team” dynamic**

When it has not been possible to deal with tension or conflict on the governing board constructively, and the situation has become untenable or has, or is likely to, bring the governing board into disrepute, then taking formal action may be the only way forward.

In such cases the appropriate rules and procedures should be applied, whether that is to suspend or remove a governor/trustee under maintained school regulations or articles of association as appropriate. Advice should be sought from the clerk to the governing board or relevant governance professional on how the relevant rules and procedures should be applied.

The [GOLDline advice service](#) is available to NGA Gold members and provides strategic, procedural and legal information on all aspects of maintained school and academy governance.