

## TRANSCRIPT OF ONE QUESTION PODCAST

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<b>TITLE:</b>	As a Secretary to the Board, how can I deliver an effective induction for board members?
<b>DESCRIPTION:</b>	Induction for Board members is an important opportunity to discuss with them what is important to the organisation. In this podcast, we talk about how the Secretary to the Board can organise and delivery induction material to best effect.

Will ([00:02](#)):

Welcome to the One Question Podcast from O'BRIEN/ Governance Design, who specialise in corporate governance for the public and not-for-profit sectors. I'm Will Francis, and in each episode I ask Trish O'Brien a different question about corporate governance. This episode, the question is, as a board secretary, how can I deliver an effective induction for board members? Hi Trish.

Trish ([00:25](#)):

Hi Will, how are you doing?

Will ([00:26](#)):

I'm very good, thanks. So, in episode 1, we talked about external evaluation of public sector boards. What are we talking about today, Trish?

Trish ([00:35](#)):

Well, we said the last time that we'd look further at some areas of governance that form part of external evaluation, and things that come up very often when we're doing evaluations as creating some problems, maybe for secretaries and for board members. So for this episode, we're going to look at induction for board members, which happens when they join the board, and again, our focus is on helping those who support boards, which is usually a secretary to the board or an equivalent person.

Will ([01:06](#)):

Right. So, induction of board members, that sounds like it would apply beyond just public sector boards?

Trish ([01:13](#)):

Yeah, I think most of what we're saying on induction, it applies equally well to not-for-profit boards and a lot of it is relevant to the private sector too.

Will ([01:24](#)):

We mentioned codes of practice in the previous episode on board evaluation. What do the codes say about induction and the role of the secretary in that?

Trish ([01:33](#)):

Yeah, it's useful sometimes just to go back to those codes and to see what they say about the various topics that we're talking about. So, in terms of the *Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies*, that's the code you'll recall that applies to public bodies, it says that board members should receive formal induction on joining the board. So that's an expectation. And it also says that under the direction of the chairperson, the responsibilities of the secretary of the board include facilitating induction, mentoring and assisting with ongoing professional development as required and we're going to look at professional development in the next episode; I think that's something that is connected to and relates to induction. Then for the charity sector, we've got the *Charities Governance Code* of the Charities Regulator that applies in that sector and it says that it's vital that new charity trustees receive a proper induction to the charity and that a comprehensive induction programme for new charity trustees needs to be put in place. Just one thing to mention, I suppose, we use the term 'secretary' in these podcasts, we've been saying that as kind of a shorthand as it were, but just to acknowledge that in a lot of charities and smaller organisations, it could be that the responsibilities of the secretary are shared amongst a number of people.

Will ([02:55](#)):

I see, right. That's good to know. And before we get to the real nuts and bolts of induction, just tell me why is that part of the process so important? Why does it really matter?

Trish ([03:11](#)):

The purpose of induction essentially is to help board members to fulfil their roles and their responsibilities. I think it's also setting a tone really. It's the first introduction that a board member has to an organisation. They've been asked to carry out an important role. They have significant responsibilities and I think induction is the time whereby the organisation first gets to engage with that board member to tell them what's important and to talk to them about any concerns they have about the role. And I think if it's done well, it really, it can set the stage for what happens afterwards.

Will ([03:54](#)):

I can imagine that there's not really a one size fits all approach to that. You know, board members will come to that role with a range of different experiences and will need different levels of support during induction. Right?

Trish ([04:09](#)):

Yeah. I think it's important in any interaction with board members to be aware that they're coming to a board with different expertise, and that's why they're on the board. And you could have, you know, for instance, you could have members with direct experience in terms of what the organisation does. So if the organisation is involved in education, the member might be a learner, if the organisation is maybe in something health-related, it could be someone who's got experience of the condition that the organisation's working to support. So you often have members who are directly experiencing what the organisation does and that's very important. So that's one type of member. You've got others who maybe have experience of being on other boards. They're very useful members, too. They're the ones in particular who will hopefully help keep the board on track in terms of looking at things strategically and they'll keep things right, in terms of corporate governance and financial accountability. And then increasingly boards also have these members with specialist expertise. So maybe someone from a legal or HR background who can contribute their knowledge to the board.

Will (05:20):

So they're coming from different perspectives, but overall, what do they need to be able to do as board members?

Trish (05:26):

If we go back to the *Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies* and the *Charities Governance Code* when we take those as our reference points for the public sector and for the not-for-profit sector, I think you can actually break down the role of boards into three main categories. I think number one is they're providing strategic direction to the organisation. That's what a board is doing. Second thing is that the board is accountable for the organisation and that's corporate governance accountability, including financial accountability. And then I think the third thing they're doing is that they're fulfilling certain stakeholder responsibilities.

Will (06:04):

So presumably those roles will influence what you cover in induction?

Trish (06:08):

Well, I think they should. As we said, there are different types of board members with different experience. It's rare, you know, it's not unheard of, but it's rare to have a board member who's got expertise in all three areas that we're talking about, strategy, corporate and financial governance, fulfilling stakeholder responsibilities. I think what you're doing initially through induction is to start building expertise across the three areas. So the board members can contribute as equally as possible to board discussions and to decision-making.

Will (06:41):

And can you tell us a bit more about each of these three categories of board responsibility?

Trish (06:46):

Well, if we take the first one is around providing strategic direction to the organisation. I think this is just hugely important that the purpose of a board is really to provide oversight to an organisation and to give it the benefit of the board members' objectivity and knowledge through strategic direction. And sometimes this can get lost and boards can kind of stray into operational matters, but providing strategic direction is a hugely important part of the role of the board. And they do that primarily, and first off, through a strategic plan. And then they're kind of there to continuously monitor activities that influence the implementation of that strategic plan, and they work with the executive of the organisation to do that. So that's the first thing: providing strategic direction. The second thing is accountability and that's in relation to corporate governance, including financial accountability. The board has, as you know, obviously a critical role in terms of that. And we know what happens when things go wrong on that. And areas of accountability include things like financial reporting, internal controls, risk management, code of conduct, things like that. The board is fulfilling those accountability roles on behalf of the organisation. And in doing that, it has to be able to satisfy external stakeholders. And that could be, you know, it could be funders, it could be regulators, it could be benefactors of what the organisation does. So accountability, being accountable to others internally and externally. And then the third one is around this kind of what I've phrased as fulfilling stakeholder responsibilities. That could be a range of things. Boards often have these kind of high level responsibilities for reporting to a

government department or funding body, or regulator, that need that kind of formality of board engagement.

Trish ([08:57](#)):

Boards are also expected to be keeping the intended benefactors of the organisation at the centre of decision making and to be including their views in decision making. So, for instance, our charity involved in health will be expected to have ways to speak to patients and advocates and to take their views into consideration. So those kinds of stakeholder responsibilities I think are the third leg, if you like, of the board's responsibilities, at least in terms of how I see it. So those main roles, again, providing strategic direction, being accountable for corporate governance, including financial governance, and fulfilling stakeholder responsibilities. And I think if the person supporting the board's induction keeps those roles in mind it could really help them to structure a lot of what they want to tell board members at induction.

Will ([09:55](#)):

Right. So when you've been completing external evaluations of boards, what are some of the things that you've seen that could be improved upon or avoided when a secretary is putting together an induction system?

Trish ([10:07](#)):

Well, a few things come up regularly which are maybe worth mentioning. I think the first thing to try and avoid doing is not to overload the board member with documentation that they can't digest. Board members often say to me that they can't remember what was covered in induction and mostly that just comes from how the information is presented to them. They often get a board manual. They may get some general introductory information at the start. It's all good and valid, but I think if the information they're given again could be organised more around those roles, the kind of categories that we've talked about or some other type of categorisation, that would work for the organisation, and help the board member to orientate themselves around that information and to connect it with their responsibilities.

Will ([11:08](#)):

Yes. So, ordering the information for them from the outset and linking it to the different roles they play as a board member. They're the bigger points, but is there any other advice that you've got on induction?

Trish ([11:21](#)):

I think in terms of format, often induction is delivered on an in-person basis, you know, traditionally that's always how it's been done. I think we've become more comfortable with engaging in different formats. We should maybe think about delivering induction in a variety of ways. So, you know, for instance, some induction information could be recorded via audio or video and could provide an ongoing relevant source of information for the board member.

Will ([11:54](#)):

It must be a challenge to bring that information to life for people in a way that's memorable and in a way that, to some extent assumes that they may never go looking for that information proactively again. So yeah, I suppose a blend of in person and also maybe even live video streams and recorded audio and

video provide a way for anyone, whatever their availability and preferences, to go through the induction and in an effective way. Right?

Trish ([12:29](#)):

Yeah, I think so. A lot of what we do tends to be one shot, you know, you sit down with somebody and you go through the information and if they pick it up, that's great. And if they don't, they don't, but, you know, why not think about different ways of doing that and having that information source available to them later on? It makes an awful lot of sense if somebody is going to be a board member for a few years. There might be a later time where they want to come back to information.

Will ([12:59](#)):

Yeah. But I suppose what puts some people off creating that content - it sounds like it might require skills and equipment to produce it.

Trish ([13:09](#)):

Yeah. I think that's true and that can be off putting, and I've been put off myself in terms of some of those things, but it's like anything, once you start to get some experience of doing things and look into it, then you realise that there's some easy options. I mean, one thing we've done recently is just to record a narrative over PowerPoint slides, and you can do that straight from your laptop by just pressing the record button on PowerPoint. It's really straight forward.

A couple of other things I think we would recommend from speaking with board members and from doing these evaluations, I think one thing is following up with board members. And again, it's trying to maybe just get away from the idea that induction is just one meeting, one time, one opportunity to ask questions.

Trish ([14:05](#)):

I think keeping in touch with a board member, giving them as much support as possible at the start of their terms so that you and they are getting the best value from their attendance and from their contributions as well. And I think, you know, just extending your thinking on induction into at least the first meeting and encouraging the chair...you know, this is very important, to be working with the chair on this, but also encouraging the chair to ask board members to ask questions and to identify gaps in their knowledge and to try and get to grips with things as early as possible; just encouraging that open conversation. And acknowledging that not everybody is going to know everything. That's just not feasible.

Trish ([14:51](#)):

The third thing then just to mention I think, is induction for subcommittees. Generally, this doesn't happen. I think it's really worth providing subcommittee induction because what you have are board members, and you could have quite experienced board members, who are then asked to serve on a subcommittee. And sometimes it's just assumed that they know the business of that subcommittee. And often they don't because it can be much more detailed than what they're seeing at a board level. So I think it's just very important to take the time to talk through with that new committee member, what the purpose of that committee is. And it will just accelerate their ability to contribute to the work of that sub-committee.

Will ([15:33](#)):

Okay. So it's good to think about induction in a broader context, so you can give board members as much help as possible when they're starting out. Now you mentioned that we're going to be talking about professional development for board members in the next podcast. Would you say there's a natural connection between induction and professional development?

Trish ([15:54](#)):

Well, I think professional development can be looked at as kind of a continuation on from induction. You've got induction where you're trying to support the board member at the start to fulfil their roles. I think professional development is then how their knowledge and skills are developed further as they progress in their roles as board members. And as discussed in the next episode, I think a similar approach to planning for induction could be used for planning for professional development.

Will ([16:23](#)):

That's great. I look forward to talking to you about that in our next episode.

So, having looked at how to support board members when they join the board through induction, in our next episode, we'll be talking about how to support board members on an ongoing basis through professional development. I hope you'll join us and don't forget; you can find out more and access resources, templates, and One Question Guides at [obriengd.ie](http://obriengd.ie). Thanks for listening.