

## The Innovative Board Index \*\*\*Prototype\*\*\*

A trustee board has the power to influence the culture of an organisation by the way it behaves. If you want your organisation to be innovative, consider how innovative you are as a board. Being reflective about how you work can help you improve: this index aims to help you reflect as a board. For background read the blog post [here](#).

How to use this index

1. Each board member: Look at each characteristic of an innovative board and decide where you lie by shading the box below across to the number best representing how nearly the sentence describes you/ your board
2. Whole board: share results (you may wish to keep this anonymous) and through discussion arrive at an agreed profile for the board as a whole. Calculate board score.
3. Whole board: look at the areas you are weak on and decide how you will improve. See suggestions overleaf for guidance.

Characteristic	Description	Never → Always 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Challenge/Involvement	I feel motivated and engaged to contribute to board meetings	
Idea Time	We explore ideas in meetings and do not let time pressure to get in the way	
Idea support	Ideas are listened to and considered positively	
Trust and openness	We are open and frank in board discussions	
Playfulness and Humour	Board meetings are fun with plenty of laughter	
Conflict	Egos, interpersonal tensions and diversity of opinion is dealt with professionally	
Debate	Different options are discussed and listened to	
Freedom	We have the freedom to act independently and do not do just what the CEO or Chair tell us	
Risk Taking	We are not over cautious and are prepared to grasp new opportunities	
Score		

What to do if you score low on...

### Challenge and Involvement

All board members should feel motivated to contribute and involved in the vision of the charity. Motivation for many trustees comes from valuing the work of the charity and feeling they can make a difference or give something back. A simple exercise is to spend some time at the start of a meeting asking each trustee to tell the others why they became a trustee and why they care about the objects of the charity. You could also take some time as a group to revisit the vision, mission and values of the charity.

### Idea time

How many meetings have you been at that start with the chair stating 'Well we have a lot to get through today so we need to make a prompt start if we are to finish on time'? Time pressure stifles innovation as it does not allow participants to feel free to come up with or explore ideas. Try running meetings differently: stand up for first 15 minutes and deal with things that can be decided quickly; try voting on things that need a decision before discussing them – if you have a consensus, you may not need to discuss them at all; try having a meeting with an entirely flexible timeline; try not using your usual agenda and getting rid of standing items occasionally.

### Idea support

The Code makes reference in Principle 4 to maximising value of diversity as a way of challenging institutional assumptions and thinking. Institutional thinking can be a killer for ideas. Think about the things you say in meetings that crush fragile new ideas such as 'Yes but...'; 'That's not the way we do things..'; 'We tried that and it did not work..'. Become Angel's advocates for ideas. Try saying 'Yes and...' rather than 'Yes but..' to ideas that come up in meetings.

### Trust and Openness

If trustees do not feel trusted and respected by the rest of the board, it will hinder ability and willingness to contribute and put forward creative solutions to problems. If you score low on this try to find out the cause and deal with it. Is it because people are gossiping?; not giving credit where it is due?; not signing up to collective decision making and saying outside meetings 'Well, I never agreed with the decision'? A low score on this is a cause for concern and you may want to get in external advisors.

### Playfulness and Humour

A relaxed atmosphere encourages people to free up their minds. It is no coincidence that children are measured as much more creative than adults and they play a lot. If the board atmosphere is over formal and people feel afraid to make a joke or laugh, it can stifle innovation. You want trustees to look forward to and enjoy meetings without being frivolous or unprofessional. Try putting toys on the table, encourage drawing to put across ideas, start the meeting with drinks and food before getting down to business.

## Conflict

If there are real personality differences on the board and constant conflict, you have a problem and should consider getting professional assistance. If energy is going into personal animosity it is taking it away from creativity and certainly not in the interests of the beneficiaries.

## Debate

Debate on the other hand is welcome and encourages development of ideas. A low score may indicate an authoritarian chair or some very strong personalities on the board who dominate. Recognising that this is a problem may in itself help solve it as simply being aware that you should listen to and consider a variety of opinions may be enough. If not, consider working out some board values and meeting groundrules and making one of them valuing constructive debate.

## Freedom

People with freedom to define their work within agreed parameters or in pursuit of an agreed mission tend to find more creative solutions to problems. If your board does not feel free and feels that their work must be carried out in a very prescribed way and that they must do what the chair or the CEO says, they will not be as creative as they could be. If you score low on this, try to have an open discussion about why and decide on steps to take to change.

## Risk taking

You cannot be innovative unless you are prepared to take considered risks. If your board is risk averse, revisit the Code which states very clearly that whilst trustees must have regard to risk, they must also be aware of the risk of missing opportunities. Try taking some small risks with your meetings such as some of the things mentioned above on how to run playful meetings and have innovation time. Reflect on what happened when you took a small risk and start to become more comfortable with risk.

This is a prototype tool aiming to help boards assess how innovative they are and provoke discussion and positive change. If you try it out, please provide feedback on the blog or by emailing [consultancy@ncvo-vol.org.uk](mailto:consultancy@ncvo-vol.org.uk) putting 'Innovation Index' in the subject field. If you want to know how you are doing relative to other boards, email your score too.