

Effective MAT governance

Unit 3 transcript

Accountability of the trust board and the implications of this for delegation

When we became a MAT with just the three schools, our first thought was to play it safe and stick with what we knew in terms of governance. This meant having a local governing body at each school with maximum delegation. Crucially, what we didn't appreciate was that, as trustees, we were accountable for all decisions made by committees, including the committees we called local governing bodies, but now call academy committees. We soon worked out that our scheme of delegation was essentially not fit for purpose, for two main reasons.

Getting the structure right - holding the executive team to account

The first reason was that it did not make clear who was performance-managing the headteachers in each of the schools and that in a MAT it is no longer the academy committee, but is actually the CEO. This meant that the academy committees were operating as if they were maintained school governing bodies, and so were, in effect, duplicating the role of the CEO. This meant that the heads felt as if they had two bosses. It also meant that there were more reports and more meetings than was necessary.

Getting the structure right - line management

The second reason was that we had not made the leap in thinking required when taking into account shifts in line management. In effect, we had given the academy committees responsibilities that they no longer had the leverage to ensure were being carried out.

An example - safeguarding

The matter which brought this realisation to us was safeguarding. At the beginning, ABCAT relied on the schools continuing with safeguarding as if they were still maintained schools. In other words, each academy committee was responsible for making sure that its school was compliant with safeguarding requirements. What we hadn't thought through was that the risks associated with this were high. This is because the academy committee no longer manages the headteacher so it doesn't have the leverage - through performance management - to ensure that the school is managed in a certain way and to a certain standard. Therefore ensuring that safeguarding is effective should be the CEO's responsibility and not the academy committees.

Reviewing the structure - a sensible approach

This was a big moment for the trustees, and two things happened. The first was that we commissioned an external review of governance to help us move forward with a new approach to delegation. The second was that we agreed trust-wide safeguarding policies. We also tasked the CEO with appointing a specialist safeguarding lead who now audits all our schools on a regular basis. This gives us assurance that our schools are compliant with

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the trust's policies, and that our motto of 'safe and happy every day, learning for life' is being lived in every school.

The importance of a clear scheme of delegation

Our new scheme of delegation makes clear who carries out each governance function. One of these is ensuring compliance with statutory requirements which, of course, includes safeguarding.

Developing an understanding of everyone's governance roles

Having revised our scheme of delegation, we relaunched our local governing bodies as academy committees. We needed to make it clear that there were no longer accountable governing bodies at a local level but, instead, bodies with a different governance function. We still require academy committees to appoint one of their number as the named safeguarding person who commits to building an understanding of how safeguarding works in the school; we also require all committee members to be trained in safeguarding and we, as a trust, arrange this. We do this because, unlike our CEO and the trust's safeguarding lead, the academy committee members are in and out of their school much more frequently and so see it in action every day. This means they really do know if their school is a 'safe and happy' place. We provide a pro forma report for their safeguarding committee member to complete every year. However, we also make clear that if they have even the slightest concern they must contact the CEO or a trustee without delay. All this meant that I had got very involved in understanding how, as trustees, we are ultimately responsible for how safe our pupils are. So I volunteered to take on the trust board lead role for safeguarding. Having done this, I met with our new safeguarding lead executive to find out how her work is developing in practice. I am now confident that we have the requisite checks and balances in place to be assured that, in our trust, the pupils are 'safe and happy every day' and I am able to report this formally to the board.