

Effective MAT governance

Unit 6 transcript

Understanding and embracing the accounting officer role

When I applied for the job as CEO I was aware that I might be asked about my understanding of the role of the accounting officer and so I had done my homework. To be honest, when I was executive head I sort of 'winged it' and so, as I researched the role, I was a little taken aback and realised that I should have been taking it more seriously than I had been, especially the bit about being personally responsible. I was glad I had prepared well, as the board had clearly taken advice and asked me a lot of in-depth questions, most of which I could answer.

Reflecting the accounting officer role in the job description

When I was formally offered the job, I raised the issue of the role and how I didn't feel it was adequately represented in the job description. I said that if I accepted the post, I would like the job description reviewed. Fortunately the trustees agreed and not only did that get reviewed, but so did the job description for the CFO which we advertised shortly after I became substantive CEO.

The CEO holds the school heads to account and the need for a clear scheme of delegation

Interestingly, since I've been CEO, it has clarified for many people that I have to account to the board for the performance of the trust as a whole so I have to be able to hold the schools' heads to account. This, and clarity as to the academy committees' role through an effective scheme of delegation, has made my job easier as I have been able to build professional relationships with my heads and align meeting with them according to their and my needs

The important role of the academy committee

I still include the academy committee chairs in the annual review as I value their perspective on the day-to-day, but the line of accountability being clear has enabled me to nip issues in the bud.

Developing support networks for school leaders

I have also been able to create support networks amongst the heads, deputy heads and subject leads. The feedback on these is really positive.

Meeting the challenge of unitising financial management systems

My background is in accountancy in medium-sized charities and so I came into this role feeling quite confident. However, I have found that transitioning all schools onto the same financial systems has been trickier than expected, as has reporting to the board. There have also been some challenges in getting schools to accept that school budgets are set centrally.

The need for a trustee board with financial expertise

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We have some very financially experienced and astute trustees (and academy committee members too) and I can honestly say that finance committee meetings, which are held six times a year, are an excellent example of constructive scrutiny and challenge. Their input has been invaluable and, on their advice, we have developed much more effective approaches for a range of different things, from evaluating the viability of other schools who would like to join ABCAT, to better procurement. The latter has already resulted in annual savings of some tens of thousands of pounds.

Using curriculum-led financial planning to make the most of our resources

Recently I have been working very closely with Chris in building an understanding of curriculum-led financial planning, which we hope to roll out next year; I also feel that our good working relationship is based on me ensuring that the day-to-day operational stuff doesn't get in the way of the CEO's current focus on school improvement, whilst providing the assurance that financial management is effective so that, as accounting officer, Chris can sleep soundly at night.

The need for a consistent, trust-wide, performance management approach

We recently reviewed and amended our staff appraisal and pay policies, along with procedures for tightening up on all aspects of performance management. It took some time, as we were keen for all our schools to understand why we needed to clarify how things worked, but pointing out to all that it was partly to ensure that the CEO is robustly managed by the board seemed to give the right message.

The trustees' role in CEO appraisal

Our policy requires trustees to agree which two trustees are tasked with the CEO's appraisal and review, although it is clear that one of these should be the chair. I have been nominated to work with Viv and also, as per the policy, we commissioned a consultant to advise us.

Focusing on the strategic priorities in CEO objective setting

The scope of the appraisal process was reduced to a focus on Chris achieving the key strategic priorities that the board has agreed need to be met for us to achieve our vision. Much of this requires us to have a clear picture of how the schools are meeting what is expected of them so that we can be assured that Chris is holding them robustly to account. We have also increased the focus on financial sustainability and how the trust's budget is being managed.

Commissioning expertise to support trustees with appraisal

The consultant was really helpful in determining the measures that we need in place to track progress with achieving the key performance indicators. Holding to account will be easier from now on as we are all clear about what we are trying to achieve and why.

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The trustees' role in relation to risk management

As I mentioned earlier, I deal with risk in my day job and so, having read the Academies Financial Handbook, I was keen that at ABCAT our practice should be exemplary. Fortunately, Chris's CEO course had covered risk management in some detail, and he and Viv agreed that I should put in some time with Chris on this.

What we hadn't realised is that Nick is pretty knowledgeable too and so the three of us got our heads together and brainstormed a long list of possible risks and a simple scoring system, which meant we could RAG rate each one. I then left them to it. Nick has created a sensible structure, grouping risks into categories with Chris refining the assessments.

Creating a risk register

The first draft of the risk register went to the Resources Committee, where some more changes were made, including agreeing our appetite to risk. Then it came to the trust board for final sign off. We've committed to reviewing the register quarterly and this is increasing our confidence about the trust and focusing our thinking. Chris now reports termly to the audit committee on new risks and any changes to status, and the committee reports to the board. Meanwhile, Nick is working with the school business managers on school level risk registers. These will align with the trust one, and it will be interesting to see how their risks align - or not - with the ones we have identified. I suspect their focus will be more on safeguarding and standards, whereas ours are more focused on financial systems, sustainability and growth. But overall, a considerable step forward in our MAT's governance and management practice