

# Capacity Building Project



## GOOD PRACTICE CASE STUDIES

### Case Study 14

**The Organisation:**

Optua

**The Challenge:**

To improve the quality of the organisation's trustees/directors

**The Response:**

Introduction and implementation of a trustee appraisal scheme

**Examples of Good Practice:**

1. Introducing an organisation-wide appraisal
2. Gaining trustee agreement for an appraisal process
3. Implementation and review of the trustee appraisal process

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## **The Organisation:**

Optua

Optua was first established in 1981 as Mid Suffolk Rethink for Disabled People as a response to a lack of services and facilities in the largely rural area of Mid Suffolk. By June 1996 it had become Rethink Disability providing services for people with disabilities across the county. In 2005 it changed its name to Optua which is taken from the Latin translation of “Be your best” and its mission is to “enable and empower people to be their best whatever their disability”.

Optua, now one of the largest charities in Suffolk, provides a wide range of services to disabled people including access groups, advice and advocacy, care, community brain injury services, community transport, leisure and training in addition to running the Volunteer Centre Mid Suffolk. Optua also represents disabled people on a wide variety of voluntary and statutory committees involved in the planning, monitoring and provision of services for disabled people across Suffolk. It works to provide disabled people with the opportunities to play an active part in the community and to help them recognise their equal right to take part in all aspects of daily life. It is an incorporated charity with a board of directors/trustees.

## **The Challenge:**

To improve the quality of the organisation’s trustees/directors

With the organisation spread across many projects and in many different locations it was recognised that whilst an appraisal scheme existed within Rethink Disability (as it then was), it was not being implemented uniformly. In 2004 the management at Rethink decided to ensure that appraisals were conducted to a uniform standard in all the projects and different locations. To this end they commissioned Suffolk Association of Voluntary Organisations (SAVO) to run half day training sessions on appraisals for both staff and managers (approximately 140 people in total). The Chair of the Trustee Board attended one of the sessions and it confirmed in her mind the need to include trustees in the appraisal process.

Appraising trustees is still a comparatively rare process within the voluntary sector. While amongst the very large national charities it has become the norm, many organisations are reluctant to undertake this for a number of reasons:

- they reason that it is difficult enough to find trustees and gain a commitment from them; the thought of an appraisal would make many trustees “run a mile”
- Trustees are volunteers and therefore, it is sometimes felt, they should not be treated like paid staff.

## **The Response:**

Introduction and implementation of a trustee appraisal scheme

One of the key strengths of Optua is that they have a committed chairperson and a loyal band of trustees/directors who understand the importance of learning and development. Undertaking appraisals was therefore seen as a natural process in ensuring that the Board worked to its full capacity. As several board members were also chairs of sub-committees and sub-groups they could see the benefits of reviewing their performance, their views on the organisation and their skills development. A unanimous board decision was reached to go ahead with the process. SAVO helped by providing a

template form which would allow each trustee to prepare for their appraisal and it was agreed that the two Vice Chairs should appraise the Chair. Because Optua were due to relocate to Claydon near Ipswich, it was agreed that the appraisals would take place once the move had been completed and this has now taken place. The chairperson is at present writing up the appraisals and will submit a report to the Board on how the process went and what actions have arisen from it.

## **Examples of Good Practice:**

Optua recognises the importance of developing a rigorous appraisal system; bringing the trustees into the process will not only complete the cycle but will also help to make staff aware of Optua's commitment to the process. The Chairperson has enjoyed conducting the process as she feels it has helped her to understand the motivation of trustees, their concerns and their views on the organisation and how it is run.

### **1. Introducing an organisation-wide appraisal scheme**

Optua takes its personnel management duties very seriously and appraisals help to improve the motivation of staff and trustees. It should help managers to understand the motivation, issues and challenges that their staff face and help the trustees to work together with a shared vision of how Optua will develop in the future.

Optua recognises that for appraisals to work they must be seen as an ongoing process where progress is monitored, actions are undertaken and people's aspirations are, where possible, met. It is no good going through the motions where appraisals happen, the paperwork is filed away only to be brought out a year later with no reference to the appraisal in the intervening months.

An appraisal can provide a personal "business plan" for the employee and help to set the agenda of regular supervision sessions. For trustees the appraisal can assist in developing a sense of shared ownership of board decisions and common purpose as well as address issues of concern and skills/knowledge needs. It can also provide reassurance for trustees who may, at times, feel uncertain as to their role or usefulness. Many trustees join a board because they want to help their community of interest – they themselves sometimes need help in determining the best way they can do this.

### **2. Gaining trustee agreement for the appraisal process**

Trustees could be reluctant to initiate an appraisal process because they feel they will be judged and criticised on their performance. It is important to dispel this fear and misconception. For staff it is a cardinal rule that an appraisal should not contain any surprises. If there is a regular supervision structure the appraisal represents a summation of what has been discussed during the previous year's supervision meetings and a look forward to the next year. For trustees the situation is often different in that there are usually fewer opportunities for individual meetings with the chairperson during the year. Sometimes it might be advisable not to use the word "appraisal" but to call it "a trustee review."

In Optua's case getting agreement from the trustees for an appraisal system did not present any problems. The Board meets regularly and they appreciate the need for training and development events and attendance at both board meetings and training seminars is good. Additionally the Board works well as a team and the thought of an appraisal process carried no threats for any of them.

### 3. Implementation and review of the trustee appraisal process

SAVO provided Optua with a template trustee appraisal form which, in the words of the chairperson, was “tweaked” to make it relevant to Optua’s board members. Each trustee was given the form in advance to make their own notes in preparation for the meeting. The questions related to:

- what they considered their role was as trustees and what support they needed to fulfil the role
- what had gone well and not so well within Optua over the past year
- what skills/ knowledge the individual trustee brought to the board
- what training and development needs they had
- their views of how Optua should develop in the future
- any other particular concerns.

Appraisals took place in a private interview room at the Optua offices in Claydon and the chairperson allowed at least 90 minutes for each interview. This seemed to work very well and provided plenty of opportunity for discussion. The chairperson herself was appraised by the two vice chairs. She felt that the review had led to a better understanding of her trustees’ motivation and any concerns they had. Currently the appraisals are being written up and these will be issued to the individual trustees to comment on and sign, once agreed. The chairperson will discuss issues that have arisen with the Chief Executive and then present a general report to the Board on how the process went, what common messages and issues of concern arose and to agree action points.

#### Sharing the Learning:

Optua are one of the first charities in Suffolk to institute a trustee appraisal system. This is a positive step which demonstrates commitment to an ongoing improvement process and a recognition that if trustees are going to provide a strong governance role, their own performance needs regular review and monitoring.

#### Lessons Learnt

If trustees are to govern an organisation effectively, they will probably need training and development both individually and collectively

If organisations are committed to improving their management and governance, then the trustee board must be willing to review its own performance.

Members of the trustee board should be willing to undertake annual appraisals or reviews themselves and the chair should also be appraised

Both the chair and the individual trustees should prepare for the appraisal interview.

The board and the senior staff member should review how the process went and what actions should be undertaken as a result.

#### Questions To Consider

- Have you conducted a skills review of your trustee board and identified any areas of weakness?
- Have you discussed and provided training or development events for members of your trustee board, either on an individual basis or collectively?
- How do you monitor the performance of your organisation?
- Are your trustees willing to monitor their own effectiveness?
- Has your trustee board discussed instituting annual appraisals for themselves?
- Will your chair/vice chair need training in conducting appraisals?
- How will your trustees prepare for their appraisal?
- Do you have an appraisal preparation form?
- How will you review the appraisal process?
- How will you take forward any actions identified?