

# Effective representation? Easy!

## Seven guidelines for those new to serving as an elected representative

Have you just become a member of a Works Council, client advisory council or some other representative body? Then congratulations are in order! You are about to enter a whole new world. You will be introduced to activities such as strategic change, personnel policy and communication, and will gradually discover how an organisation is managed. But, to begin with, it can be overwhelming. How do you go about it?

It is fascinating to deal with such a wide range of issues. But it can also be overwhelming. Especially when you bear in mind that you can also express views on proposals on all these issues... issues you may know little if anything about. It feels like a big responsibility. But don't worry. You don't have to gain in-depth knowledge on each of these subjects before you can serve on the council. Even without a degree in business administration, economics, law or communication, you can still do an excellent job. All it takes is a little courage, the ability to listen and patience.

### Don't be afraid to ask questions

The meetings you attend will discuss changes within the organisation, investments and regulations. Of course, if you have a background in these areas you can add value as a council member. But it is not correct to assume that, to do your job effectively, you need detailed knowledge of such things. Knowing about all these things is not your primary task. A director is responsible for the decisions made within an organisation. That's their primary task. They are expected to know what they are talking about. You, on the other hand, can sit back and ask questions. A good director should be able to answer your questions. Explaining their plans where necessary is part of their job. If, in your capacity as a council member, you don't understand the background to certain decisions, there's a good chance that many of the people you represent won't either.

You don't need to know everything to effectively represent those who elected you. The ability to articulate what you don't know what makes you a good council member. If you ask a director a question, you can expect them to explain things in a way that the people you represent can understand. The fact that you learn so much about the organisation – and possibly also about business administration, economics and communication – at the meetings is an added bonus.

Be aware of the current concerns

So, besides asking questions, is there anything else you can contribute as a novice council member? Absolutely. There is at least one area in which you can immediately provide important inside information: you are aware of the issues that currently concern your colleagues. Explain what they are! This is also how you represent those who elected you. So keep an ear out for matters that

concern your colleagues. And don't be afraid to tell the director. Because that's also part of your job as a council member!

## **Be effective in the way you communicate**

Is that all there is to it? You simply ask questions and explain what concerns the people you represent? More or less. But, by following a few guidelines, you can make your input more effective.

### **Guideline 1: Feel free to ask questions**

Possibly your most important asset as an elected representative are the questions you put to the director. You can ask questions because you want to deepen your understanding of an issue. For example, asking the director why they chose a certain solution is a good question. It's also good to ask which pros and cons were taken into account. You can also ask questions to learn more about the principles that led to a decision. For example, this might involve asking about change management, legislation or financial policy. The answers to these questions will help you gain a better understanding of the 'why' of a decision.

### **Guideline 2: Don't jump to conclusions**

First, do your best to understand what the director wants to do and why. Before reaching a conclusion and expressing criticism, make sure you understand the issues involved. Be careful not to imply criticism in the way you phrase a question. Bear in mind that the other person may be quicker to detect criticism than you think. For example, the question 'Why wasn't action taken sooner?' might be a genuine question, but it might also convey a sense of dissatisfaction. In which case, are you really asking a question? Because your intention is not clear, the director can't give you a clear answer: they don't know whether to address your question or the implied criticism. Also, by implying that you have reached a conclusion before you know enough, you run the risk of not being taken seriously. Forming an opinion without knowing all the relevant facts is something we all do at times. But it's unwise. We know from experience that once an opinion has been formed, it is very difficult to change it. From that point on, we tend to focus on facts that confirm our opinions and ignore those that suggest the opposite. So do your best to really listen to what is being said on the other side of the table. It's not easy.

### **Guideline 3: 'Stick to the facts'**

As we have already mentioned, one of your main tasks as an elected representative is to find ways to discuss the issues that concern the people you represent. For example, this might involve describing their response to a change process. But bear in mind that the experience of the people you represent is by no means always 'the truth'. For example, your colleagues may experience a change as unnecessary, when it may in fact be very necessary. However, the fact that the people you represent don't recognise the need is something the director needs to be aware of. Because it will affect their motivation and that will affect the potential success of the change. So, at the council meeting, simply discuss the fact that 'We hear from many of our colleagues that they don't understand why this

change is necessary.' The fact itself is indisputable. Then you can discuss how this needs to be taken into account in the further planning.

#### **Guideline 4: Present a problem, not a solution**

When informing the director of a problem at a council meeting, it can be very tempting to immediately suggest a solution: 'The people I represent lack confidence in the management. So the management should ...' This may be well meant, but it is unlikely to be effective. First you need to raise awareness of the problem. For, generally speaking, only those who recognise a problem are interested in solving it. A good director who becomes aware of a problem will automatically take action.

#### **Guideline 5: Stick to making suggestions**

The director is responsible for resolving problems. So, if you manage to convince the director that there is a problem, avoid trying to tell them how to solve it. If you do, the director may feel that you are overstepping your authority and may react to your behaviour rather than to what is being said. As a council member it is best to simply make suggestions. And, ideally, only when invited to do so by the director. Then you can be certain that the director is genuinely convinced that there a problem and is keen to adopt the right approach. Lastly, and this is very important, leave it to the director to decide which solution to pursue.

#### **Guideline 6: Don't be overly attached to your preferred solution**

Your job is to represent the people who elected you. This includes endeavouring to ensure that their interests are adequately taken into account in the decision-making. Everyone, especially the director, expects you to do this. However, the people you represent are probably not the only stakeholders. What looks like the best solution to the people you represent may not look like the best solution to the other stakeholders. The director needs to consider all points of view and will generally choose the solution that most closely satisfies all interests. If, as a council member, you only consider the interests of the people you represent and try to force through solutions that work out best for them, you ignore the interests of other stakeholders. This shows a lack of respect, also in relation to the director. So it is important to also be open to other solutions. The director is more likely to embrace a solution that they themselves have chosen than an enforced decision. The solution will then have the greatest chance of succeeding, in everyone's interest. So this is another reason to keep an open mind and not be overly attached to your preferred solution.

#### **Guideline 7: Learn to tolerate uncertainty**

Change processes invariably involve an element of uncertainty. Even when a director has decided on a course of action, there is still a degree of uncertainty. As an elected representative, your job is to ensure that all of the relevant factors were taken into account in arriving at the chosen solution. However, you also have to accept there is always some uncertainty as to whether a decision that has been made will work in practice. Of course, it's important to agree what the solution needs to deliver.

Then you have a shared frame of reference that will enable you to assess whether the solution works. And if it doesn't work (sufficiently), the agreements you make will serve as a springboard for a discussion of alternatives with the director.

## **In short...**

Regardless of your level of experience, as an elected representative, you can contribute to the consultation process from the start, by asking questions and explaining the issues that concern the people you represent. That way you are fulfilling your mandate, which is to represent those who elected you. Leave the responsibility for the ultimate decisions to the director. That's their job, also in the consultation process. It takes courage to admit that there are things that you don't (yet) know. But, if you can do this, the rewards are considerable. You will quickly learn a great deal about the organisation you're dealing with, organisational management, finance, decision-making and so much more.

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