



GOVERNING WELL

FIVE QUESTIONS AID ORGANISATIONS'
GOVERNING BOARDS SHOULD BE ASKING

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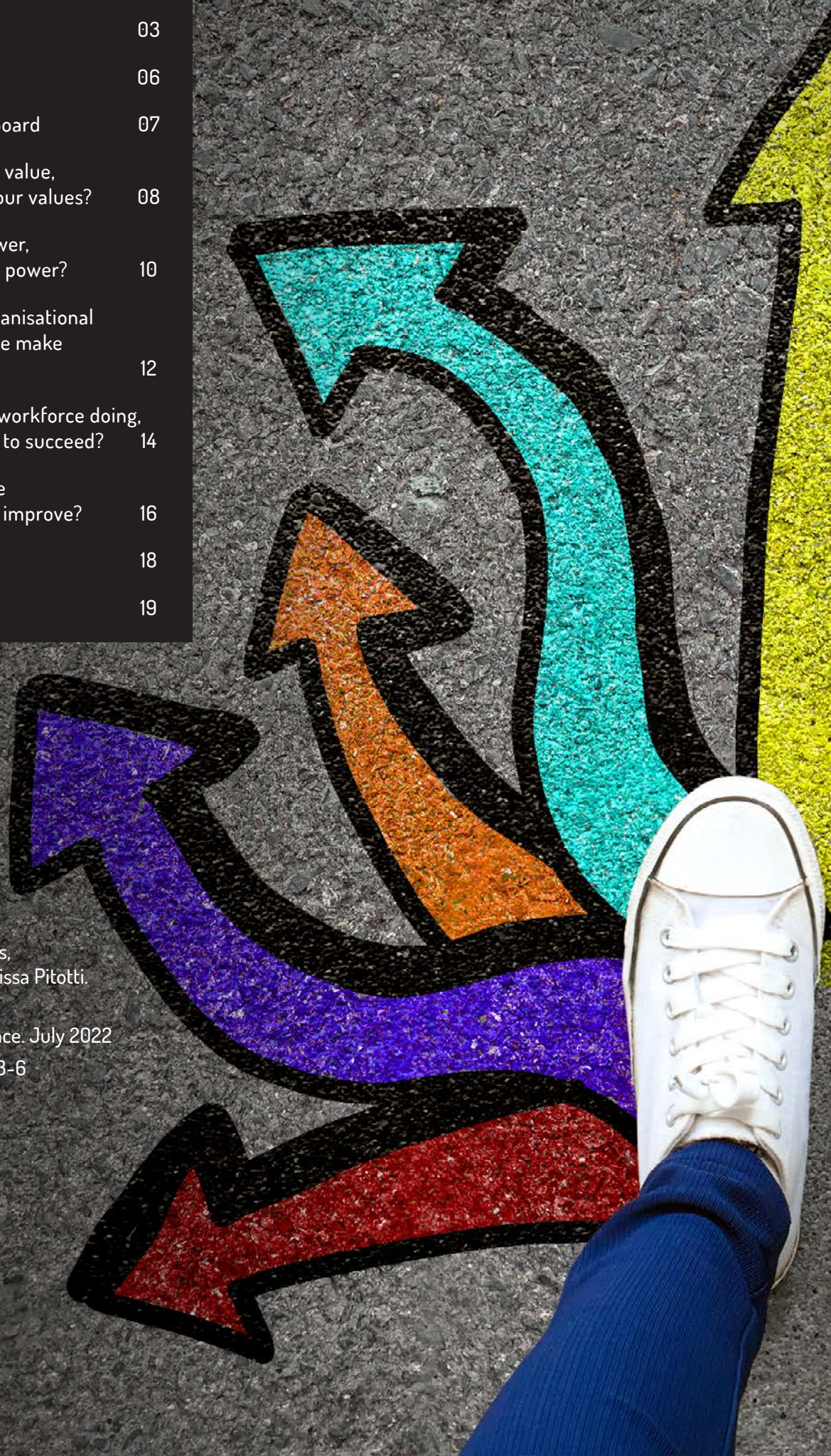
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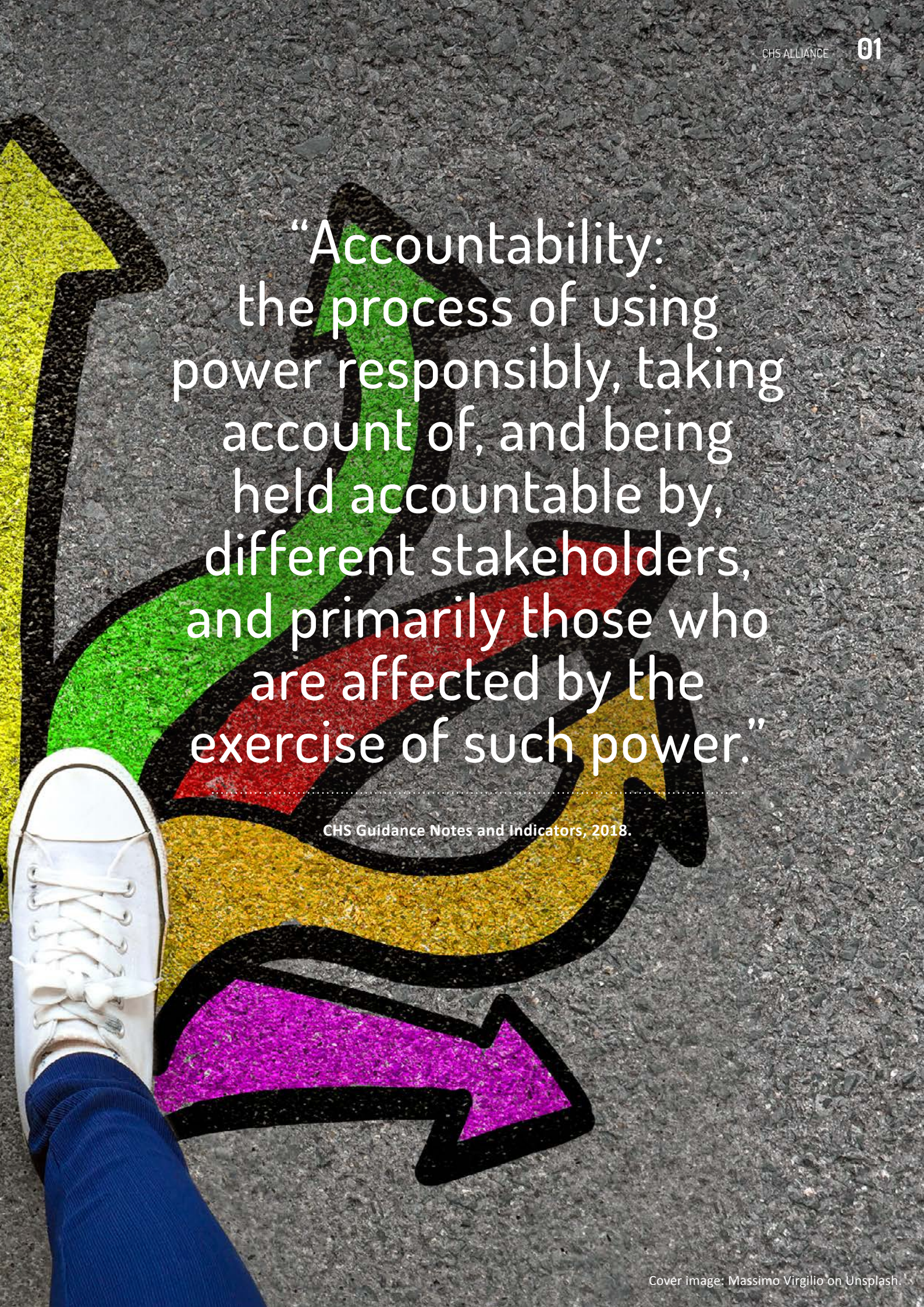
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A high-angle, first-person perspective shot of a person's foot wearing a white canvas sneaker with white laces, stepping onto a path of colorful arrows painted on a dark asphalt surface. The path starts with a yellow arrow pointing up and to the right, followed by a green arrow pointing up and to the right, then a red arrow pointing up and to the right, then a yellow arrow pointing up and to the right, and finally a pink arrow pointing up and to the right. The arrows are thick and have black outlines. The person's leg, wearing a blue sock, is visible in the bottom left corner.

“Accountability:
the process of using
power responsibly, taking
account of, and being
held accountable by,
different stakeholders,
and primarily those who
are affected by the
exercise of such power.”

CHS Guidance Notes and Indicators, 2018.

WHAT IS ACCOUNTABILITY? WHAT IS POWER? WHAT ARE WE, THE CHS ALLIANCE BOARD, DOING FOR OUR PART? WHY FOCUS ON GOVERNANCE?

FOREWORD

The CHS Alliance 2022-2025 Strategy demands accountability to people affected by crises.¹ This is easy to say, but a bit harder to explain, and even more complex to make a reality. We would like to give this concept a bit more granularity and set the stage for the document you are about to read.

First, what is accountability? The most recent guidance note of the [Core Humanitarian Standard](#) defines it as “the process of using power responsibly, taking account of, and being held accountable by, different stakeholders, and primarily those who are affected by the exercise of such power.”² This definition hinges upon a key word, “power,” and a key constituency group, “those who are affected by the exercise of such power.”

Accountability: the process of using power responsibly, taking account of, and being held accountable by, different stakeholders, and primarily those who are affected by the exercise of such power.

CHS Guidance Notes and Indicators, 2018

So what is power? A plain language definition of power is “the capacity to influence the behaviour of others.” In our organisations we can name the people with recognised positional power, like CEOs and managers, governing board members, donor representatives and auditors. We can list the policies and procedures that influence behaviour, like the Code of Conduct, policies on staff-care and whistleblowing, procurement thresholds, complaints mechanisms and due diligence requirements. What is a bit harder for us to explain is the invisible power of our organisational culture, which profoundly influences the way we operate – both inside and outside the organisation – and people’s willingness to hold aid organisations to account.

And what is organisational culture? In plain language, it is “how we really do things around here.” It includes our values, mindsets and behaviours. How do we treat the people we serve as well as our staff, volunteers, interns, consultants and partners? Do they feel valued, no matter what? Do they feel safe, no matter what? Public post-mortems on the recent failures in aid organisations often point to our organisational culture as a significant, yet under-appreciated, contributor to abuse of power and misconduct.

Why focus on governance? Governing Boards are usually not involved in their organisations’ day-to-day operations, where they would be most confronted with organisational culture. There is a segregation of duties that makes it so. But this culture is a key component of how organisations impact the people they interact with at different levels. When boards operate in a vacuum and their awareness of the organisations they oversee is divorced from the invisible power at play, they can (and often do) miss important warning signs and opportunities to proactively address issues before harm occurs. Moreover, Governing Boards have their own cultures, which set a tone at the top and influence the extent to which they are attuned and responsive to potential problems.

What are we, the CHS Alliance Board, doing for our part? We have endorsed a strategy that implicates us in holding the CHS Alliance Executive Director accountable for the implementation of her team’s workplans and ensuring associated risks are regularly monitored and addressed. We will continue to learn from the experience and views of people from crisis-affected communities who sit on our governing board. We will be open to exploring current ways of operating to find better approaches. We will model the behaviours we seek by intentionally embodying the Standard in how we operate.

The CHS requires a comprehensive, integrated approach to improve accountability across the whole organisation, from governing boards and senior leadership to programme staff and support services. We started by looking at aid workers in “Working Well” published in 2020, moved on to CEOs in “Leading Well” published with ICVA in 2021, and now present you a reflection on governing board members in this document, “Governing Well” in 2022.

The next stop on this journey will be a reflection on the role of donors in “Funding Well,” to be launched in 2023. We will keep learning, leaving no stone unturned until we have engaged everyone with formal, positional power across the sector in reflecting on their roles and how they can better use, or shift, or release their power for a sector that operates in alignment with core values.

“Accountability to people affected by crises is not just about organisational policies and processes. We must challenge outdated power dynamics that govern the current system and find new systemic ways of working grounded in, and based on, local realities. CHS Alliance will put greater engagement into working with system-level change, globally and at the country level, to research, guide and contribute to new systemic ways of working, and advocate to those in power to bring about change.”

CHS Alliance 2022-2025 Strategy

Learning within and across organisations is fundamental, so we invite Board members to use these five questions to open up conversations in your own contexts and share what you discover in the process. We are confident that by doing so, we can increase trust and hope in our shared future.

“EFFECTIVE TRUSTEE BOARDS LEAD BY EXAMPLE, SETTING AND OWNING THE CHARITY’S VALUES, SETTING THE STANDARD AND MODELLING BEHAVIOURS THAT REFLECT THOSE VALUES, AND REQUIRING ANYONE REPRESENTING THE CHARITY TO REFLECT ITS VALUES POSITIVELY. AN EFFECTIVE CULTURE OF KEEPING PEOPLE SAFE IDENTIFIES, DETERS AND TACKLES BEHAVIOURS WHICH MINIMISE OR IGNORE HARM TO PEOPLE AND COVER UP OR DOWNPLAY FAILURES. FAILURES TO PROTECT PEOPLE FROM HARM SHOULD BE IDENTIFIED AND LESSONS LEARNED AND THERE SHOULD BE FULL AND FRANK DISCLOSURE, INCLUDING TO REGULATORS. THERE SHOULD BE CLEAR CONSEQUENCES FOR ANYONE WHOSE CONDUCT FALLS SHORT OF WHAT IS REQUIRED REGARDLESS OF HOW SENIOR THEY ARE.”

Inquiry Report: Summary Findings and Conclusions, Oxfam (p33)

Charity Commission for England and Wales

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EXECUTIVE (OR GOVERNING) SUMMARY

We embarked on this Governing Well journey with the help of an Advisory Circle, a series of conversations with governing board members and experts, a review of publicly-available regulatory frameworks, and multiple case studies (using a governance lens) of organisational failures.

We anchored the work in conclusions from the 2020 “Working Well” and 2021 “Leading Well” reports. We tested our ideas with the CHS Alliance Board and with participants of the 17 May 2022 Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Weeks [session](#). We published one of the interviews in the 19 May 2022 [episode](#) of the Embodying Change podcast.

The key message emerging from the data is that aid organisations’ Governing Boards could and should play a much stronger role in ensuring that their organisations meet the CHS Commitments to people affected by crises.

This includes getting a better sense of how the organisations they oversee operate, not just what they deliver. We propose that a Governing Board that “governs well”:

1. identifies and “embodies” its values
2. understands and uses power responsibly (accountability in action)
3. promotes a safe, supportive and equitable organisational culture that prioritises the well-being of its people (all staff, volunteers and consultants)
4. monitors organisational performance towards the Core Humanitarian Standard, and
5. emphasises learning and improvement over perfection.

Many of our members’ governing boards have good practices to share along these lines, but there is generally still much work to be done at a time when governing boards are already stretched. This report suggests five simple questions for self-reflection that any board can integrate into their agendas going forward:

1. What do we value, and how can we “live our values”?
2. What is power, and how do we use our power?
3. What is organisational culture, and how can we make ours people-centred?
4. How is the workforce doing, and what do they need to succeed?
5. How can we continuously learn and improve?

With each question anchored in the CHS, this report explains why these seemingly abstract issues are so important. It explains how, concretely, they relate to governance. It tells the story of a fictional aid organisation’s governing board, which is a composite of some (but not all) of the boards studied for this project.

This fictional board reflects on the five questions and then works to clarify values, adapt mindsets and adjust behaviours – all based on what we learned in the research. Sprinkled throughout the report are quotes from practitioners, investigators, regulators and academics.

WE DON'T HAVE
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RESOURCES, BUT
WE GENUINELY
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ORGANISATION
TO SUCCEED.



A FICTIONAL GOVERNING BOARD

For the purposes of learning, we created a fictional governing board of a fantasy aid organisation. This is a composite of the some but not all of the institutions studied in the Governing Well project. Feel free to use this story to serve as the basis for a conversation in your own governing board.

We are governing board members of a beloved aid organisation. Normally, our board meetings are held quarterly (a combination of virtual and face-to-face meetings). But since COVID, we've met less and less, and we haven't seen each other face-to-face for years. We have some new Board members that we barely know.

Our Zoom calls are primarily packed with discussions of strategy as well as performance and financial updates (including revenue forecasts). Since we are an international governance board spread across the globe there are always some people who are dialling in very late or very early.

It seems like every meeting has a new hot topic, like a security concern or an unforeseen programmatic hurdle. Different board members are enthusiastic about different aspects of the organisation's work. The diversity of opinions and the range of priorities is remarkable.

The organisation is part of a bigger family of sister agencies in other locations. It is a large and tangled web we work in, and we don't always know if we are acting in a way that is consistent with how the others in our family are acting. We often find ourselves deferring to one or two members of the board who seem to know what they are talking about.

We are all volunteers. We have regular day jobs. Outside of this governing board, we have other commitments related to work, caring for others, volunteering, etc. We don't have endless amount of time and resources (mental or financial) to dedicate to this function.

Ever since the beginning of COVID, the organisation's budget has been eroding. Staff continue to get cut in waves, while remaining staff have been asked to make up the difference. People know that more cuts are possible, so they try to find ways to boost their job security. There have been rumours of increasing incidents of bullying, harassment and burnout.

A few of the "high performing" staff have left the organisation as soon as they secured other work. This has negatively impacted the organisation's workforce as well as the people it serves. This information is not coming through in the senior management team (SMT) reports, but there are small signs popping up here and there.

PROMPTS

- What questions should we, as a Board, be asking?
- What habits or practices should we be developing?
- What support might be needed?





QUESTION 1:

What do we value, and how can we “live” our values?

The Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) was developed by the humanitarian sector for the humanitarian sector after a lengthy, participatory consultation. Its aim is clear: for people affected by crises to access **effective, quality** support from **accountable** organisations. The CHS verification scheme offers a way to “live” the Standard using a measurable, verifiable benchmarked framework.



“Board accountability comes with the fact that we have committed to our values, and at each board meeting we check back on our values. This is such an important exercise for us.”

Réiseal Ní Chéilleachair

Board Member, International Council of Voluntary Associations (ICVA)

Why is this important?

As noted in the Leading Well report, the systems in which humanitarian organisations operate often pull attention away from crisis-affected people and towards self-preservation. Organisations are extrinsically incentivised to compete for resources, power, and status and comply with procedures created by those in power.

When organisations, teams and individuals operate in ways that are out of alignment with their core values they will experience higher rates of abuse, neglect, waste and burnout. It takes repeated, intentional and sustained effort to stay connected to our intrinsic motivation: to relieve the suffering of the world’s most vulnerable people. Staying connected to our values becomes critically important in times of high stress.

What can Boards do?

Boards can set aside time to clarify what they care about, for example by using the Nine Whys activity of Liberating Structures. They can then decide how to imbed their priorities into daily, monthly, quarterly and annual habits, and monitor their performance through a values audit, like the tool described by Torrey Peace in the Aid for Aid Workers Leadership Podcast.

No governing board has all the answers, so it behoves them to identify where external support might be needed and ask for it.

REFLECTIONS FROM OUR FICTIONAL BOARD:

We decided to come together for a three-day, face-to-face retreat. We had some “homework” to do before arriving, and everyone was tested for COVID before coming into the site. We were able to identify our key values, compare these values to our current behaviours, and explore how to better live our values.

First, we value **compassion**. The reason our organisation exists is to be aware of the suffering of others and try to relieve that suffering in our own way. But upon reflection we realised that our focus as a Board (and the organisation as a whole) has been almost exclusively focused on achieving ambitious results under deadline. Are key performance indicators on track? Are income targets being met? We realised this preoccupation was obscuring **how** our organisation’s results were being achieved. We hadn’t realised the workplace environment tolerated aggressive and even hostile behaviours that drove a deeper wedge between national and international staff and management. We decided to broaden our oversight “radar” from strategy, finance and performance to also include how the organisation was functioning.

Was it compassionate? We even decided to take some lessons in non-violent communication to model alternative ways of engaging. We nominated a point person on the Board who can receive, review and process complaints, including anonymous complaints.

Speaking of power imbalances, we also value **diversity, inclusion and equity**. But our board members are quite similar in terms of education, nationality and race and we rarely disagree with each other. To instantly get more “thought diversity” we decided to normalise dissent among board members by asking them to take turns arguing various sides of a debate; someone always has to play “devil’s advocate.” We also decided to plan bonding activities for board members to build trust and speak more candidly. We also agreed to begin exploring how to shift our board composition over the long-term.

*And finally, we value **quality and accountability**, so we’ve encouraged the organisation to invest time and resources into meeting the Core Humanitarian Standard. We will review progress reports from the CHS verification scheme on an annual basis. We will celebrate successes and also welcome the discovery of weaker areas where we can learn and improve.*

We decided to **introduce induction** sessions to make sure all of our members are on the same page as to what the values are, and how this translates into roles, responsibilities and expectations. We follow this up with regular retreats with space to discuss power, organisational culture and well-being.



“So many of us in today’s culture deliberately avoid uncomfortable conversations. Boards tend to want a consensus, but they need a diversity of perspectives. Conflict breeds creativity, because it forces you to rethink your own stance on how you approach a topic.”

Kenneth Kim

Board Chair, Canadian
Foodgrains Bank



QUESTION 2:

What is power, and how do we use our power?

A plain language definition of power is “the capacity to influence the behaviour of others.” The CHS recognises “the powerful position of humanitarian workers can lead to exploitation and abuse, competition, conflict, and misuse or misappropriation of aid.”³



“We need people to get out of the boardrooms. They should actually go and visit the places they’re serving.”

Professor Aseem Prakash

University of Washington,
Seattle

Therefore organisations should:

- assess gender and power dynamics as well as social marginalisation (indicator 1.1)
- give attention to groups or individuals historically excluded from power and decision-making processes (indicator 4.3)
- design, implement and monitor complaints-handling processes that cover programming, sexual exploitation and abuse, and other abuses of power (indicator 5.4)
- take complaints seriously and act upon them (indicator 5.5) and
- encourage stakeholders to report abuses of power (indicator 9.5).

“It is important that there is a relationship of open sharing of information between the board and senior staff, especially the CEO. The board as a whole clearly also needs to be kept informed about important issues, such as allegations of misconduct against the CEO.”

Charity Commission of England and Wales, Statement of the Results of an Inquiry, The Save the Children Fund (Save the Children UK), p33.

Governing Boards have a reputation for being quite powerful. But according to RM Emerson’s power dependence theory of social relations, the more they depend on resources controlled by others (e.g. information controlled by senior management), the less power they have in the relationship. **Like mushrooms, Boards can be “kept in the dark and fed manure.”**⁴

Board members are usually volunteers who spend 32 – 60 hours a year in Board meetings. Their day-to-day attention is usually focused elsewhere. Although warning signs exist before incidents occur, Board members are often unaware of the true extent of the problems. They rely heavily on the CEO and senior management team for information, and disclosures are not always comprehensive and candid. Clear oversight and scrutiny is warranted, as these risks are of corporate significance for which trustees are legally responsible and accountable. Boards should usually delegate day-to-day management and refrain from getting operationally involved.

What can Boards do?

Boards should respect the segregation of duties and refrain from getting overly involved in the management and operational issues of the organisations they oversee.

But they should assume – and even anticipate – problems will occur. Boards ideally, as Petros Florides describes, keep their “noses in and fingers out.” Board members should show interest, ask smart questions, and pursue further lines of inquiry when the answers they receive do not, as Steve Dennis adds, “pass the smell test.” They must “ensure there are effective oversight, assurance and accountability mechanisms in place. Specialist committees, internal audit, meaningful briefing and reporting by the executive and other assurance mechanisms are critical.”⁵ When bad news surfaces, they should consider visiting the site in question to see for themselves what is happening.

Once Boards are aware of misconduct, **Boards are inclined to protect others in positions of power – like their CEOs, peers, and organisation’s “star performers” – rather than hold them to account.** Trustees have been known to “circle the wagons” and suppress any actions that could damage the reputation of themselves and the organisation. According to Henri Tajfel’s Social Identity Theory, groups give us a sense of social identity, a sense of pride, self-esteem, and belonging.⁶ We divide the world into us vs. them, or in-group vs. out-group. Governing boards are often drawn to side with their peers, even those who have made grave mistakes, and support management rather than staff, the organisation rather than the whistle-blower, and professional staff rather than non-professionals.

What can Boards do?

Board members must be willing and able to put in place clear consequences for anyone whose conduct falls short of what is required, regardless of their status. They should avoid the tendency to be more lenient to the “star performers” and politically connected. Term limits are helpful to reduce entrenched power.

REFLECTIONS FROM OUR FICTIONAL BOARD:

At first, we didn’t really think about power. But then we scheduled a reflection session on what it means for our Board to be **power-sensitive** and considered how to apply this to our own role and behaviours. These insights have influenced us profoundly, impacting how we set our agendas and facilitate our meetings. It has made us curious about how power works in the organisation we oversee, and consider the most marginalised when asking questions.

When we thought about our own power and privilege as Board members, it became very clear that we have to do something about our **Board composition**. None of us have lived in the communities served by our organisation. None of us have worked in this organisation before. We’re going to actively recruit at least two to four people with lived experience to participate on our Board and provide them support as needed. We are also considering bringing a staff representative onto the board, like they do at AMEL Association, or at least getting staff more engaged in our activities. We want to carry out a proper vetting and screening of Board members to ensure they are living the organisation’s values. We want to routinely get out of the boardroom and spend time in the communities we serve – not as tourists staying in five-star hotels but as companions in solidarity. We also decided to set term limits.

One thing we’ve struggled with is visualising **what accountability looks like**. We are responsible for holding our CEO to account, and we do so with feedback sessions based on 360 reviews. If needed, we could remove her from office. But who holds us, as the Governing Board, to account? What steps can we take to introduce accountability measures for this Board?

“We want to routinely get out of the boardroom and spend time in the communities we serve – not as tourists staying in five-star hotels but as companions in solidarity.”



QUESTION 3:

What is organisational culture, and how can we make ours people-centred?

In plain language, organisational culture is “how we really do things around here,” regardless of the written strategies, policies and procedures in place.

“Healing an unhealthy culture is the first step towards becoming a high-performing organisation characterised by openness, trust and collaboration.”

Report of the Independent Task Force on Workplace

Gender-Discrimination, Sexual Harassment and Abuse of Authority¹²

In organisational cultures that meet the CHS, managers and senior staff model and promote a culture of mutual respect between all staff, partners, volunteers and people affected by crisis (Commitment 5). Policies promote a culture of open communication, openness and accountability (CHS indicator 4.5). Complaints are taken seriously and acted upon according to defined policies and procedures (CHS indicator 5.5). People feel that they can openly discuss and declare any potential or actual conflicts of interest (Commitment 9).

However, the organisational culture in many humanitarian organisations has been described as unhealthy, dysfunctional, competitive, bureaucratic, toxic, macho, hostile, and subject to a “martyrdom” or a “white saviour” complex. Humanitarians have been observed behaving in ways characterised as bullying, mobbing, sexist and racist. Survivors of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment and their witnesses are often reluctant to report abuse due to fear of retaliation, social ostracization, and job insecurity. Those involved in protecting their organisations – like CEOs, boards and HR professionals – fear that reputational damage arising from misconduct and abuse could undermine future sources of income.

The verification data used to track organisational performance against the Core Humanitarian Standard shows the impact this kind of culture is having on organisational performance. Of the 62 indicators used to track performance against the Standard, the indicators receiving the lowest scores relate to “culture of open communication (4.5)” and “culture that welcomes and addresses complaints (5.5).” Independent investigations of misconduct repeatedly point to the need to address underlying cultural factors that permit abusive behaviour.

What can Boards do?

Boards can set the tone at the top by cultivating trust and psychological safety. Staff should see people in positions of power, including Board members, welcome the reporting of misconduct, signal an openness to learning from mistakes, and commit to act with utmost integrity. Staff must trust their reports of misconduct will be handled reliably and with confidentiality (hopefully due to previous competent handling of reports). Staff must trust they will be respected and supported before, during and after the process. Boards can track staff trust in reporting, respectful and sensitive handling of incidents, and perceptions of retaliation and they can encourage improvements over time.

REFLECTIONS FROM OUR FICTIONAL BOARD:

We decided to cultivate **curiosity** and ask questions. How does whistleblowing function here? Can staff complain without repercussions? How many complaints (internal and external) have been received, and how have they been addressed? How many SEAH cases have been reported? How long does it take to address complaints or grievances? We told our CEO and her senior management team that we would find it hard to believe if no complaints were submitted (or at least warranted), as this is par for the course working in difficult contexts.

Our motto is now **“trust trust.”** We want to build a trusting relationship between governance and management, so we’ve looked at some excerpts from the “Building Trust in Diverse Teams: Toolkit for Emergency Response.” We were struck by its ten criteria for trust divided in two categories: swift trust (competence, openness with information, integrity, reciprocity) and deeper trust (compatibility, goodwill, predictability, well-being, inclusion and accessibility). - We liked this document’s tools, especially Tool #1 (appreciative inquiry), and we will work through this over time, as trust is a process. We are exploring how to track trust of staff, volunteers and people receiving services in whistleblowing and investigations.

We decided as a Board to model a culture of vulnerability and unconditional respect.

This was informed by the new book, “The Vulnerable Humanitarian: Ending Burnout Culture in the Aid Sector by Gemma Houldey.” We first asked ourselves if we welcomed and addressed feedback and complaints about our own behaviour. The few examples that came to mind brought up some feelings of shame and regret. We quickly realised how uncomfortable complaints made us, partially based on decades of social conditioning. We studied how complaints have been handled by other organisations to get some ideas, and realised we were not alone in the struggle. Some of us got help to do the inner work we needed to give and receive feedback and complaints. We carried out pulse checks (or simple surveys) after every meeting to collect feedback and adapt our work together accordingly.

“Culture change and improvement must be embedded through the day-to-day actions and behaviours of trustees, leaders, staff, volunteers, contractors and partners.”⁷

Charity Commission for England and Wales

“Where culture fails, so does the organisation.”

safecall

“The changes we need to make at Oxfam are both systemic and cultural. They include our policies and practices... But they also include our attitudes and behaviours.”

Dr Dhananjayan (Danny)
Srisikandarajah, CEO Oxfam
GB



QUESTION 4:

How is the workforce doing, and what do they need to succeed?

Colleagues in our sector often work long hours in risky and stressful conditions. In organisations that meet CHS Commitment 8, staff are supported to do their work and are treated fairly and equitably.



“Usually everybody has lunch together. So for instance, the CEO and Deputy Regional Director Governance are both board members and they would have lunch with senior and junior staff. This promotes and reinforces a kind of camaraderie which helps people to break down the barriers of hierarchy and discuss issues relatively freely.”

Naila Hussein
Vice Chair, Community World
Service (CWS) Asia

Policies are in place for the security and well-being of staff, as well as zero tolerance for sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace (CHS indicator 8.9). An agency’s duty of care to its national and international staff includes actions to promote mental and physical well-being and avoid long-term exhaustion, burnout, injury or illness (CHS Guidance Note 2018).

However, humanitarians are two to three times more likely than members of the general population to experience burnout, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and hazardous coping mechanisms like alcoholism.⁸ This is more often related to organisational (rather than *operational*) stressors.⁹ And we should not forget the well-being of consultants, interns and volunteers.

What can Boards do?

This is simple. Boards can show an interest in staff welfare by asking questions (suggestions below). Boards can get exposure by spending time with staff, both informally over a meal or in creative collaborations. Boards can get curious about how people might be experiencing the organisation differently based on gender, race, nationality, professional status (including mobile and resident staff, but also volunteers and consultants). Boards can model care by treating themselves with care.

REFLECTIONS FROM OUR FICTIONAL BOARD:

We decided to create a People and Culture Committee, which came up with a list of questions and a series of interactions with staff:

- Are staff sufficiently motivated?
- What is getting in the way of staff being able to perform with quality?
- Do you understand clearly what is meant by wellbeing, and/or what effort have you made to better understand?
- What is the staff care policy and how is it being implemented?
- Is staff care properly resourced?
- When did we last visit the post room (or wherever the most junior staff hang out?)
- What is the workload like? What are relationships like (e.g. supportive or toxic?)
- What are the results from the last staff feedback/ staff engagement surveys, and what follow-up actions were taken?
- How many staff are on burnout and medical leave? What is the trend?
- What is staff turnover? What are the key patterns emerging from the exit interviews?
- What are you doing this year to address your staff's wellbeing?
- What happens on birthdays?



"This experience of the board and the staff working closely together helped to create bonds that have helped to nurture trust in the organisation, and between the board and the secretariat."

Erik Lysén
Governing Board Moderator,
Act Alliance



"Every board has a treasurer, and every board pays close attention to its finance management at their Board meetings. Boards needs to give the same scrutiny to its human resource management and their responsibility to people affected by crisis."

Tanya Wood, Executive
Director, CHS Alliance



QUESTION 5:

How can we continuously learn and improve?



“When board members feel that they’ve arrived, and now others have to be learning from them (rather than learning from each other) then you’re going to have a problem in your organisation, starting at the very top.”

Petros Florides
Governing Well Advisory Circle

The quality criterion of CHS Commitment 7 is that humanitarian actors continuously learn and improve. That is not all. Organisational successes and failures should be shared openly with a range of stakeholders to promote a system-wide culture of openness and accountability (CHS indicator 4.5). Why isn’t this happening?

Perfectionism

No organisation is perfect. And yet, perfectionism in the humanitarian sector is deep-seated. To err is human, but for a humanitarian organisation to err is to jeopardise future income. It is a scary thing to reveal imperfection in the form of mistakes or not knowing, but it is also a universal experience to make mistakes and to not know. Moreover, when one organisation commits a grievous mistake that results in harm, the impacts affect all organisations. According to Gemma Houldey, perfectionism is gendered and racialised. One of the antidotes to perfectionism is a learning culture.¹⁰

Ultimately the sector’s drive for perfectionism, often fuelled by the scramble for funding from donors, is unsustainable and silences many different stories of abuse and marginalisation within the workplace.¹¹

Gemma Houldey

Comfort Zone

Boards are more at ease talking about strategy and finances than they are at addressing power dynamics and confronting problematic human behaviour. Boards have traditionally been more interested, familiar and comfortable dealing with financial issues like fraud, misappropriation and bribery. They are often not sensitised, confident, nor equipped to tackle abuses of power like bullying, mobbing, harassment, inappropriate sexual conduct, suicides and racism.

What can Boards do?

Boards can set the tone by inviting their stakeholders to tell them the whole story early on, including the ugly parts, and tempering their reactions to bad news. They can consider using guided prompts from Gemma Houldey’s new book, *The Vulnerable Humanitarian*, to overcome perfectionism. Boards can also participate in peer sharing exercises with other Boards to build relationships and exchange good practices.

REFLECTIONS FROM OUR FICTIONAL BOARD:

We decided to create a Learning Committee, which came up with a list of questions:

- What don't we, as a board, know about our organisation?
- How can we exercise holistic (rather than fragmented) oversight?
- What is our organisation currently doing that we wouldn't want people outside the organisation to know about?
- Are the organisation's risks being managed effectively and in a timely manner?
- What are we learning that points to a need for change?
- How are we acting upon these insights?

We also carried out a role play exercise to **test our readiness** to respond if/ when institutional crises would arise (e.g. an allegation of sexual abuse, a staff suicide related to overwork, embezzlement, a member violating a code of conduct). The initial results were a bit worrying: we were often unfamiliar with our own policies and procedures, and uncomfortable confronting people with allegations. This gave us the motivation we needed to review our policies and procedures and practice various scenarios. Two added benefits to holding these activities was relationship strengthening and confidence building among board members.

We made a list of other things we want to learn about and built our schedule accordingly to translate our commitment to learning into action.



"How can we help create a level of openness where difficulties, challenges, mistakes, gaps and weaknesses are seen as opportunities to learn and improve rather than things to be avoided?"

Lola Gostelow
Chair of the CHS Alliance Board



"For a volunteer board member, it really takes a depth of commitment to serve and carry out the responsibility – including background reading, education, and then the thematic knowledge that's required to make the right decision when it comes to policies."

Kenneth Kim
Board Chair, Canadian
Foodgrains Bank



"Learning should not stop. There are new ideas coming in on a daily basis."

Dr. Shakeel Hayat
Board Chairman,
Foundation for Rural Development (FRD)

CONCLUSION

What we hope to see is a sector that moves closer to affected people while showing compassion with accountability, and solidarity with equity. Organisations will do the work needed to shift from a reliance on dominating power (power over others) to a celebration of transformational power (power within, power with, power to and power for).

Our places of work will feel safer, fairer and more supportive; this in turn will allow our people to work more effectively and raise concerns much earlier than they do today. Our organisations' performance against the CHS will improve year after year. We will feel increasingly confident to share with others, including our "competitors" and donors, what we have learned from the mistakes made and the creativity that comes whenever we give people the space to try things knowing they are valued no matter what.

A FINAL WORD FROM OUR FICTIONAL BOARD:

We eventually did find ourselves managing an organisational crisis. It was difficult and disturbing. We had to make some very tough decisions and deliver some serious consequences. The good news is that we had prepared for it and were able to take swift action before the damage went much further.

One of our sister boards, however, was not as fortunate. We felt empathy when seeing them grapple with the challenges at hand while under intense media and donor scrutiny.

We decided, as a board, to tell our story about learning to Govern Well to others. Many of our board members occasionally receive calls from others seeking advice.

The relationships made along the journey – within the board, with the CEO and senior managers, with the staff, consultants and volunteers, with people affected by crisis and with ourselves (as individuals) – have left us with a profound sense of connection and hope for our shared future.



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ENDNOTES

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