Community sector CEO's



Session 1: Leading with strategy and governance

A three-session program designed to help chief executive officers (and other comparable job titles) understand their role and responsibilities.

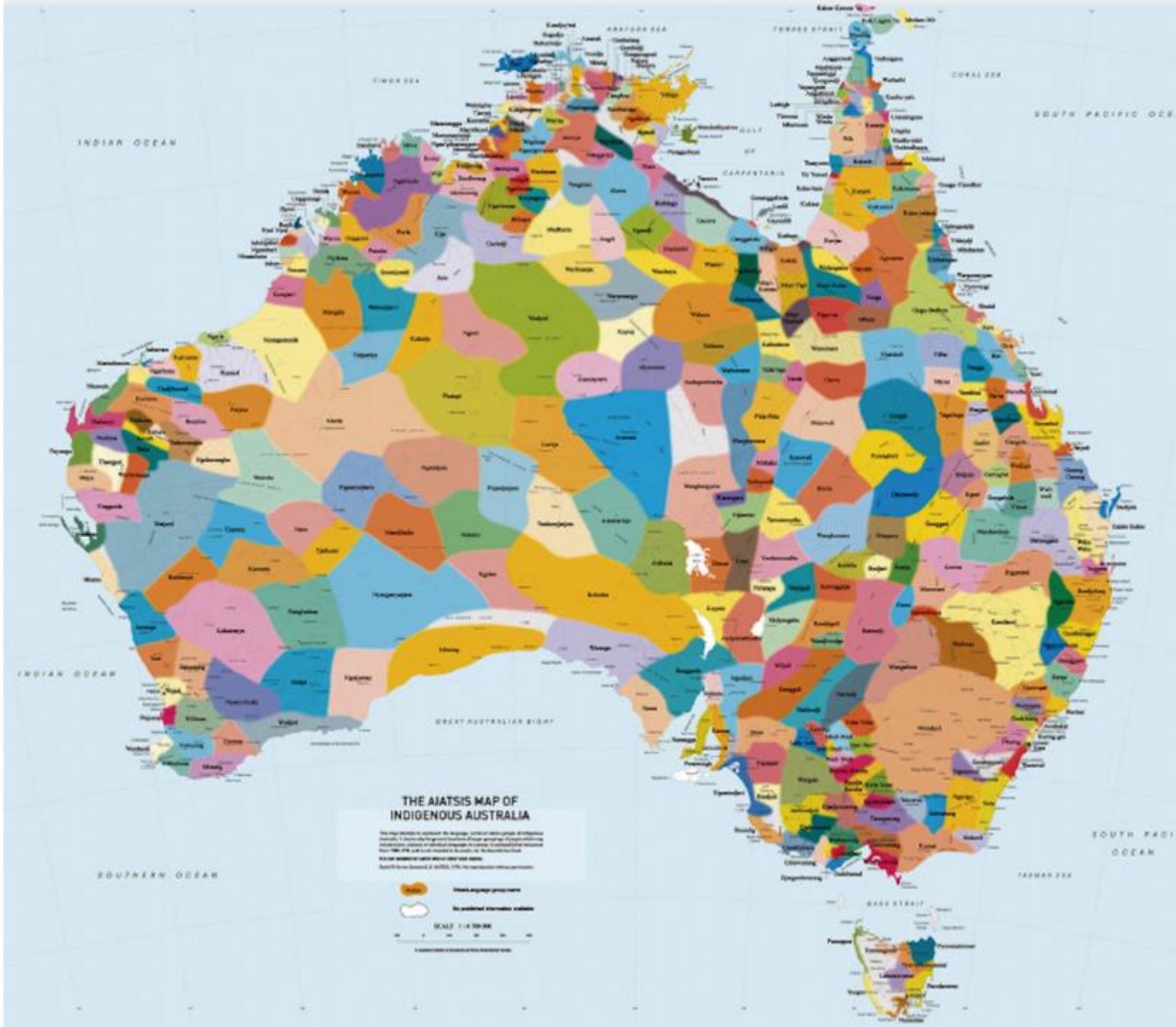
scanlon community

INSTITUTE OF COMMUNITY DIRECTORS AUSTRALIA
Knowledge Connections Credentials

An enterprise of:
ourcommunity.com.au
Where not-for-profits go for help

Acknowledgement of Country

First languages interactive map: https://gambay.com.au/



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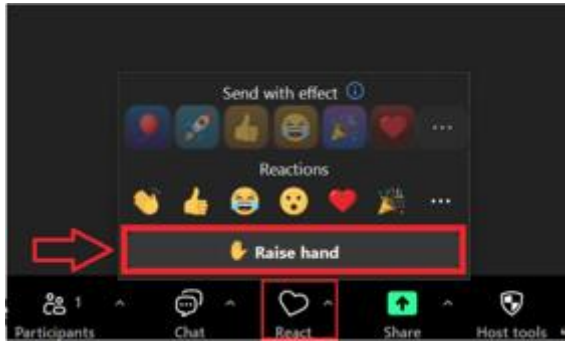
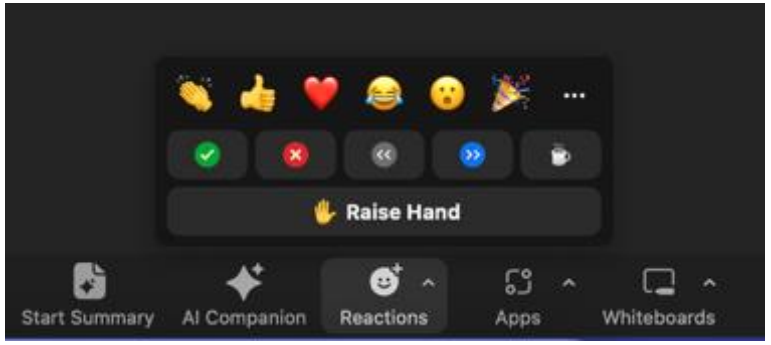
Housekeeping

- When you'd like to share with the group on mic, please use the raise hand function.





- Chat function is for everyone to use. Feel free to share your experience and advice, respond to prompts and answer any questions that arise if possible.
- You will receive the slides and the recording via the email you registered with.
- Please don't use AI to summarise or record this session.
- Please mute yourself unless you are speaking to the group.

Course outline

Session one:
Strategy and governance

Session two:
People and performance

Session three:
Innovation and sustainability

Meet your trainer

Nina Laitala

- 20 + years community leadership
- Former CEO Victorian Student Representative Council
- Musician
- 15 years community board experience



Introduce yourself

BREAKOUT.



- Your name (role) and organisation
- Why you got involved with your organisation
- Something you love about the CEO role
- What do you find most challenging about being CEO?

Community Sector CEOs

Learning outcomes

- Articulate the CEO's role in guiding strategy without overstepping governance boundaries
- Work more effectively with the board around legal duties, reporting and decision making
- Communicate strategic intent clearly to staff and external stakeholders
- Make deliberate choices about who leads key relationships and why

The CEO reality check

A community CEO is expected to:

- Deliver the mission with limited and uncertain resources
- Lead staff, volunteers and stakeholders with competing priorities
- Translate board strategy into operational reality
- Navigate risk, compliance and public accountability
- Maintain relationships with funders, partners and community
- Hold the organisation steady during crisis or change.

The CEO role is less about control and more about navigating complexity.

Strategy

- Not just a document, it is a set of choices to guide decision making.
- Aspirational goals that should be realistic and achievable over time
- Prioritisation and compromise
- Sets accountability for moving from the current state to the future state

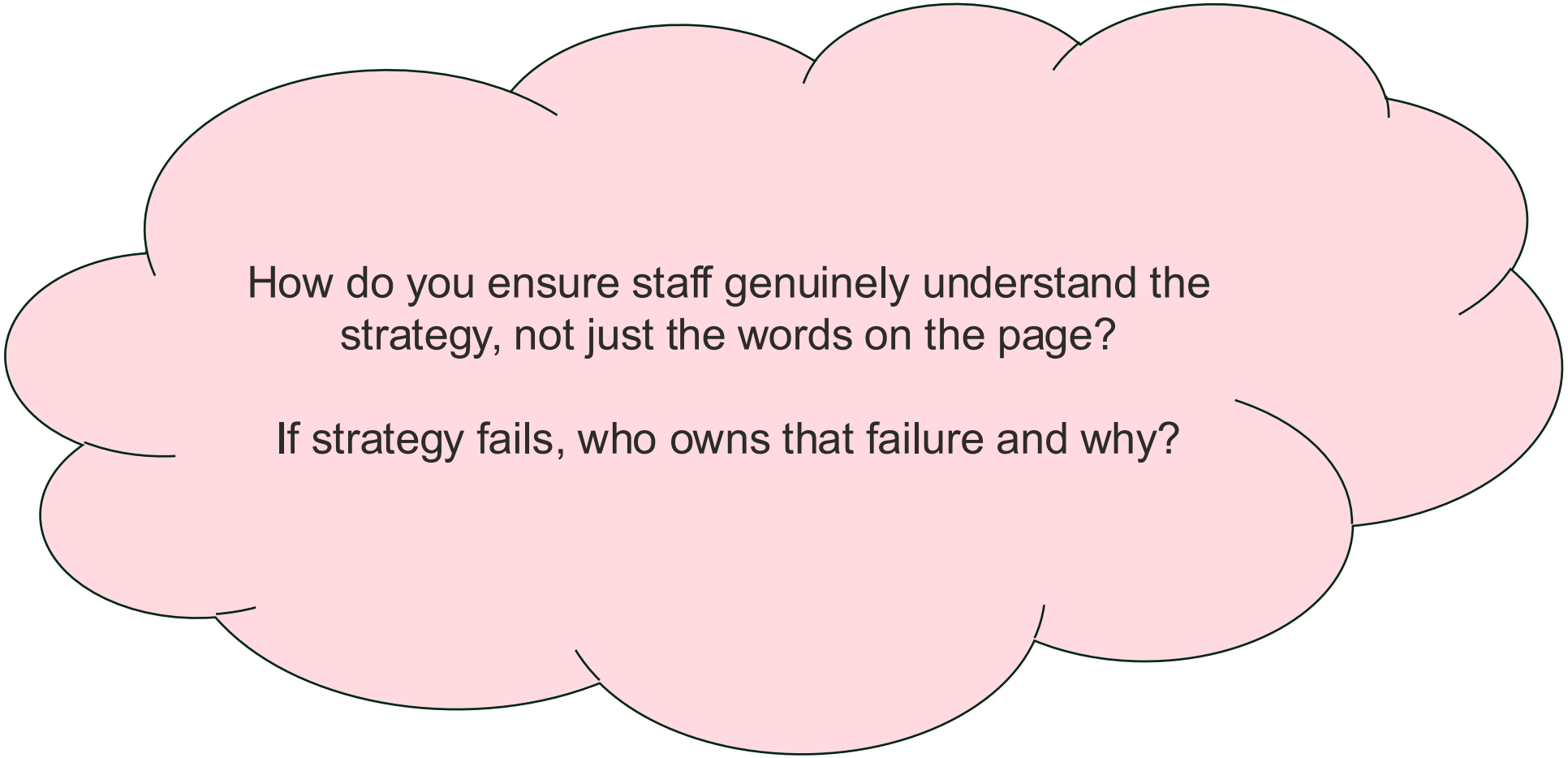
'Culture eats strategy for breakfast.'
Peter Drucker

CEO’s role in strategy

- Strategic leader, translator and integrator
- Tension between authority and accountability
- Leading with judgement, not just for compliance



Group discussion




Strategic direction = Board responsibility
Confirm vision, mission and values
Environmental review
Prioritise strategic aims
Strategic operations = shared responsibility
Budget
Identify objectives
Operational implementation = CEO/management responsibility
Operational plan to meet objectives
Specific area plans
Contingency plan

Governance and operations in the real world



Governance sets direction and constraints

Operations determine how strategy lives or dies

The CEO as interpreter between board intent and operational reality

Where CEOs get stuck

- Boards drifting into management
- CEOs unconsciously stepping into governance
- Strategy discussions that default to operational detail
- Fear of challenging the board



Case study: Delegations and accountability under pressure

The Adelaide Writers Festival operates within a governance framework where programming decisions sit under management delegation, while the board remains accountable for organisational risk, reputation, and duty of care.

Across consecutive festival years, public pressure escalated in response to invited speakers, including sustained calls to cancel Thomas Friedman and, in a later year, Randa Abdel-Fattah.

In the earlier instance, the Director described operational considerations for removing a speaker, while later accounts from involved parties characterised the decision as politically driven, creating a transparency and credibility challenge for the organisation.

In the later instance, institutional responses were framed around harm, cultural safety, and organisational responsibility, raising questions about how these considerations interact with delegated authority and board oversight.

Taken together, the cases highlight the tension between delegated decision-making and board accountability, particularly when public pressure influences both decisions and the narratives used to justify them.

Breakout discussion

As CEO, what needs to be in place so decisions made under delegation align with values, risk appetite and strategy, and are escalated appropriately before controversy arises?

When decisions are made under intense public pressure, how should the CEO and board work together to govern both the decision and the narrative, before, during and after the event?

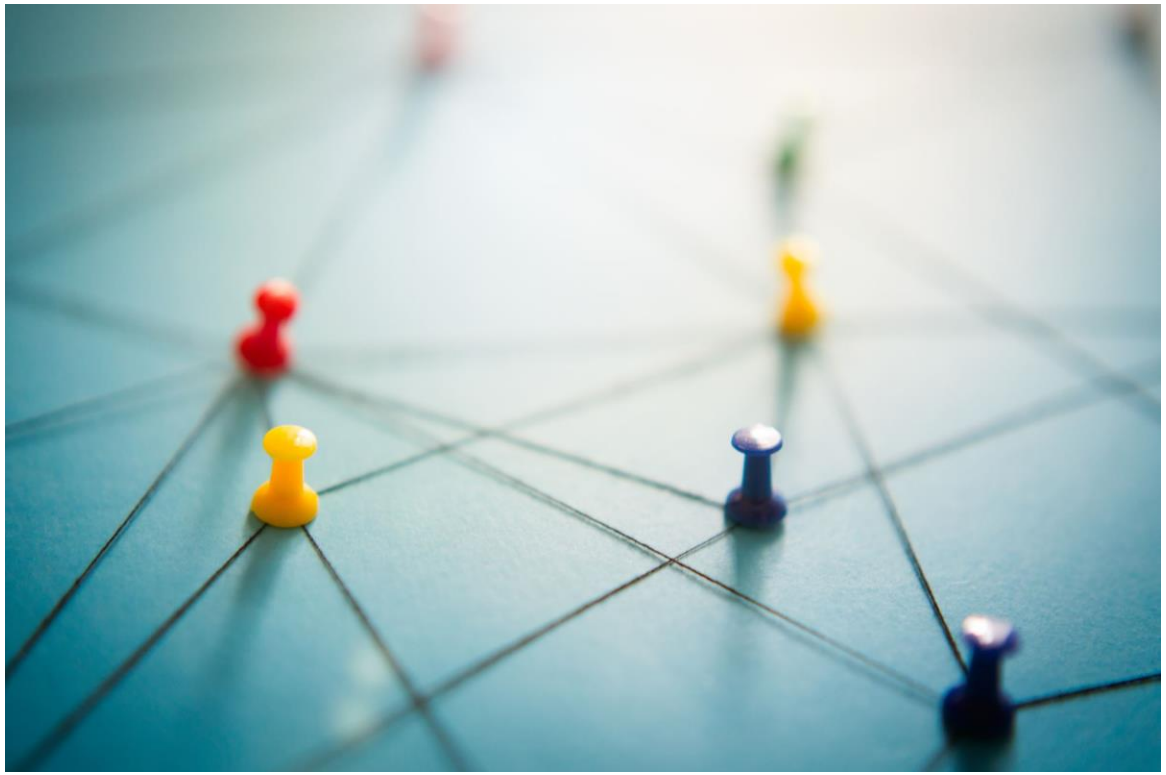
Board and CEO roles in strategy delivery

Environment
Board asks strategic questions and tests assumptions
CEO gathers insights, evidence, and analysis

Strategy
Board sets direction, priorities, and success measures
CEO leads engagement and develops options

Implementation
Board confirms accountability and resourcing
CEO translates strategy into plans, budgets, and actions

Review
Board monitors outcomes and asks strategic questions
CEO reports on progress, risks, and learning



Moving in the same direction

Consider asking everyone to complete this checklist prior to sharing an idea of a new activity, with others.

1. *How is it connected to our strategy?*
2. *Which pillar/theme of our strategy does it fulfil?*
3. *Why do it now?*
4. *Why us (why should we do it and not someone else)?*
5. *Who is going to drive it forward?*
6. *Who else is doing it already?*
7. *Low cost, no cost, large cost?*
8. *How long will it take?*
9. *What will it be competing with in terms of time? (ie what else are we doing right now?)*



Break!



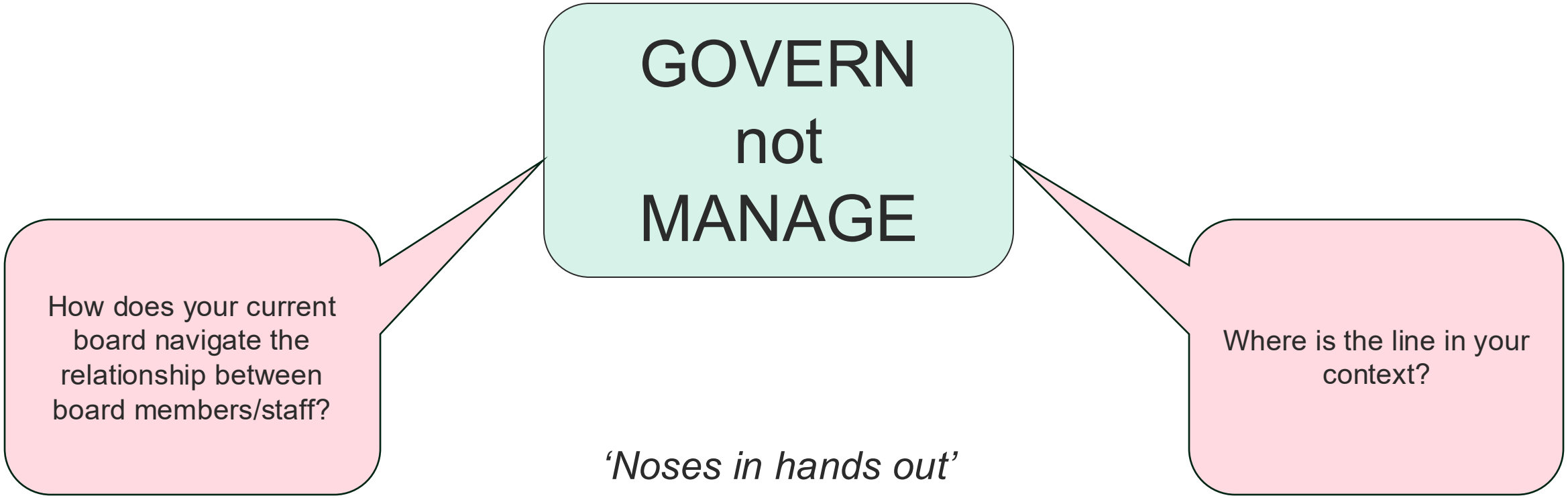
How would you describe your relationship with your board?

Any areas that need improvement?

Any aspects that are really positive?

Group discussion

What should the board do?



Core duties in practice

Act honestly and in the organisation's best interests
CEO: Shares risks and impacts early and realistically.
Board: Prioritises long term purpose and sustainability in decisions.

Avoid improper use of position or information
CEO: Discloses all material information, including sensitive issues.
Board: Maintains confidentiality and avoids personal or external advantage.

Act with care, skill and diligence
CEO: Provides clear, evidence-based advice and options.
Board: Seeks additional expertise and adjusts oversight as needed.

Avoid conflicts of interest
CEO: Flags potential conflicts in operations.
Board: Declares and manages conflicts consistently.

Prevent insolvent trading
CEO: Monitors cash flow and controls commitments.
Board: Maintains financial oversight and authorises responsible action.



Reporting

Good governance reporting should:

- be concise
- be strategic
- highlight equity impacts
- show trends and risks
- bring community voices to the table

The board should not require operational detail. Instead, the board needs:

- insight into what was heard
- what changed as a result
- emerging risks or tensions
- whether engagement is culturally respectful



Board support vs management

- Supporting does not mean protecting the board from discomfort
- Management is execution, not decision substitution
- The danger of CEOs “fixing” issues before boards see them

Case study

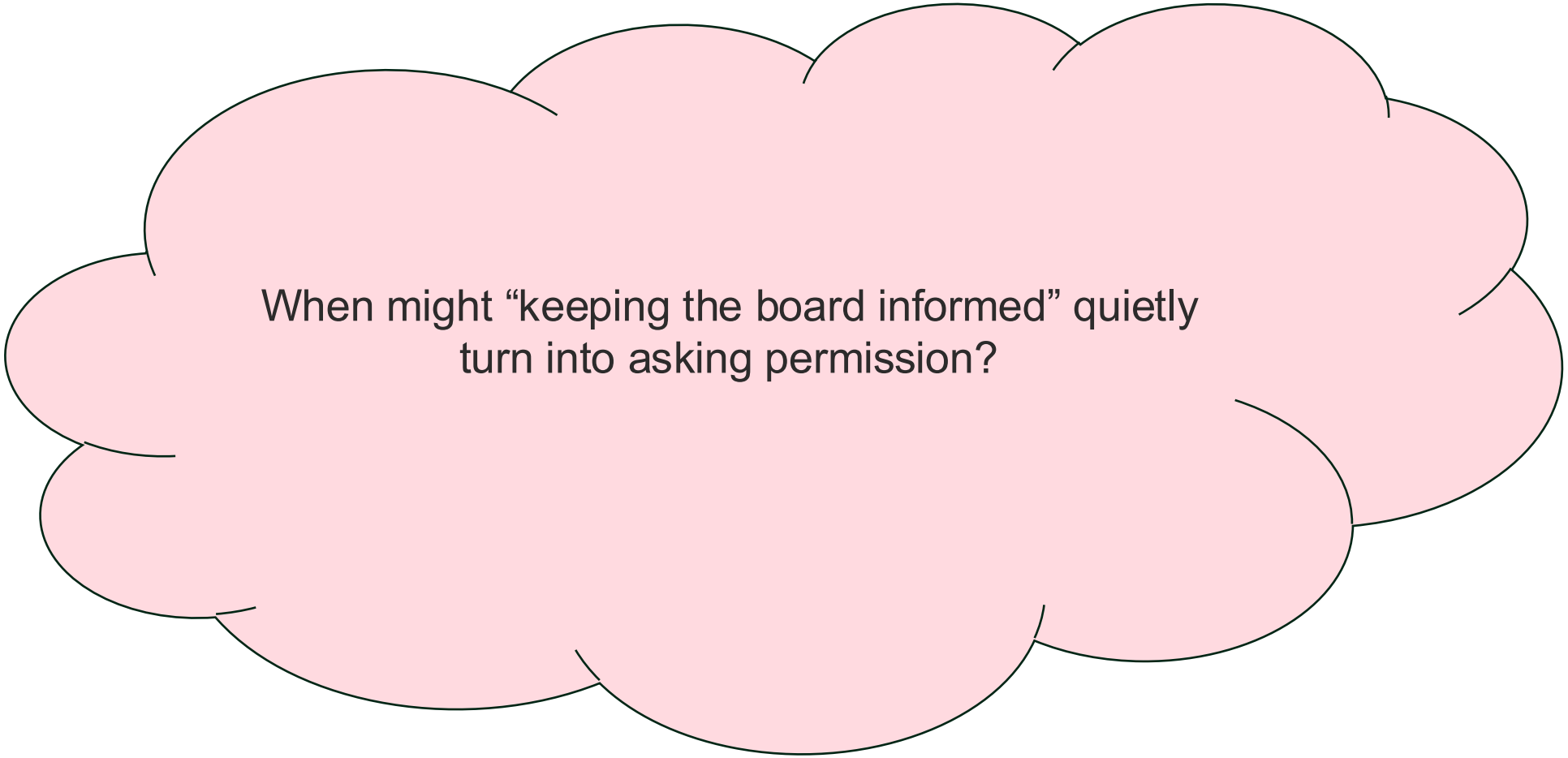
A community organisation receives complaints about unequal access to one of its services. The CEO works with staff to adjust processes and resolve the issue before the next board meeting.

At the meeting, the CEO reports that an operational issue arose but has now been addressed.

Later, a director learns the complaints were linked to broader concerns about equity and access in the organisation’s programs. The board questions why it was not informed earlier, given the strategic implications.

The CEO explains they wanted to resolve the issue before raising it with the board. The board reflects that while management should fix operational problems, issues with strategic or reputational implications should still be brought to the board, even if they are uncomfortable.

Group discussion



Stakeholder engagement

- Communicating strategic goals inside and outside the organisation
- What's the story? Who needs to know what, when and why?
- Relationship management – who leads the relationship and how does it link to strategic goals?

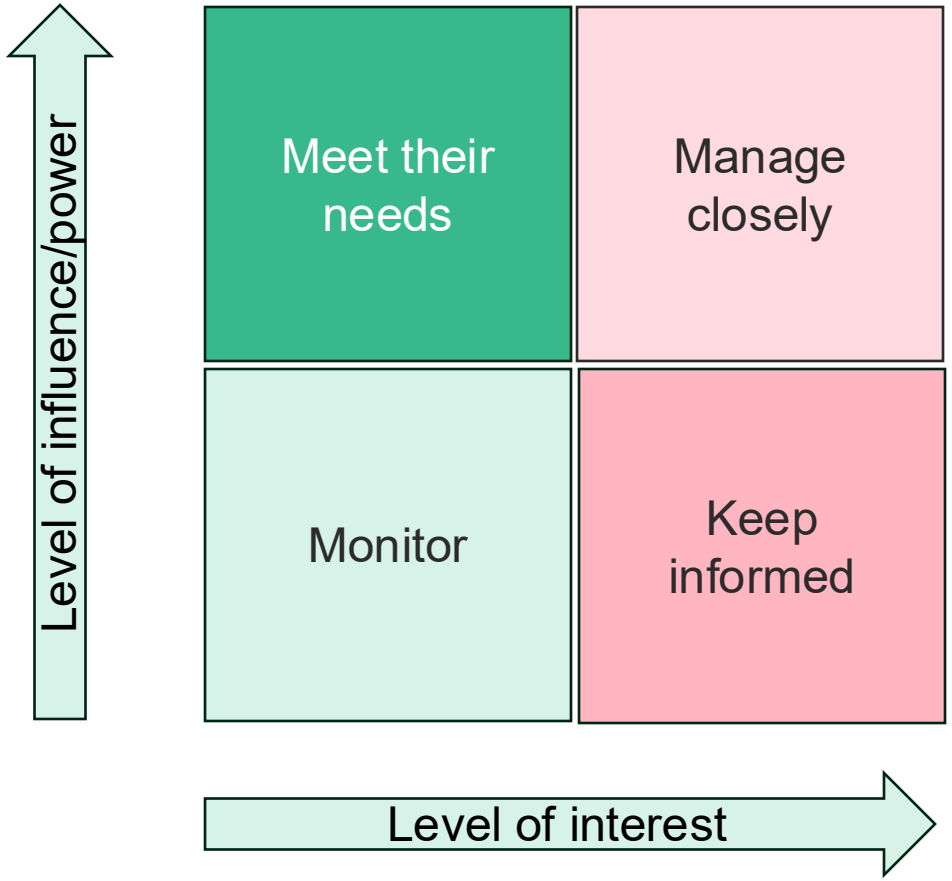
Stakeholder mapping

Stakeholder mapping helps identify who influences outcomes, who is most affected by decisions and whose voice is essential for equity.

Mapping helps define:

- who the board must engage with strategically
- who management engages with operationally
- where shared oversight is needed

Stakeholder mapping



Breakout activity:

Consider the stakeholders and their relationship with the organisation.

Who should lead the relationship, why and how?

What are some of the risks?

Stakeholders – who holds the relationship?

Scenario 1. Meeting with Elders on long term priorities

The CEO is invited to meet with local Elders to discuss long term priorities for culturally safe services. Elders expect continuity, respect for protocols and a genuine ongoing relationship.

Scenario 2. Complaint requesting board involvement

A community member raises concerns about long wait times and a culturally unsafe interaction and asks to speak directly with a board member, citing loss of confidence in management.

Scenario 3. Government contact

A key government contact raises questions about declining engagement from multicultural communities after reviewing a high-level performance report provided to the board.

Scenario 4. Major funder

A major funder requests reassurance that the organisation's new stakeholder engagement framework adequately addresses equity, cultural safety and reputational risk before confirming future funding.

Scenario 5. Major funder and government interest

A major funder and a government department are both closely watching community consultations for a program redesign. A board member with relevant expertise wants to attend the consultations, raising concerns among staff about role clarity and influence.

AI as a CEO thinking partner, not a strategist

- Clarifying strategic narratives
- Testing assumptions before taking them to the board
- Improving board reporting quality
- Preparing for complex stakeholder conversations



Reflections from today's workshop

- A key takeaway from today
- Next session: Leading people and performance

What is one thing I could do to strengthen my relationship with the board?