

For Impact: The Charity Podcast

Episode 3 – Charity CEO's: Is it too tough at the top of this sector?

Felicia: Welcome to our podcast, For Impact, the charity podcast. We're here to give voice to the sector and talk about the taboos and challenges that are holding it back and what we can do about it. Our topic today is "Charity CEOs: Is it too tough at the top of this sector?" Why charity leadership is one of the toughest gigs around and what CEOs can do to survive. I'm Felicia Willow. I'm a consultant and interim CEO, aka the Mary Poppins of the Charity Sector. I work both directly with charities on governance, strategy and change, as well as increasingly looking across the sector to resolve some of the systemic issues that hold for impact organisations back. I'm here with my co-host Chris Pitt from the Benefact Group.

Chris: Hello, again, it's great to be here today. And I guess let's crack on because one of the things we did in preparation for this podcast is to ask a wide range of CEOs to share their key challenges with us. And they did with huge emotion and honesty. And we just want to thank everyone who contributed, and particularly for me, it was the best way to prepare for this podcast. And I'm sure this is quite familiar territory for you, Felicia, as you've been in the CEO chair on many occasions. But for me, it was striking how amazingly demanding the CEO job is. A typical small charity CEO is stretched in every direction, expected to be an expert on everything and keep everyone happy all the time. It's already sounding a bit impossible to me.

Felicia: I agree. It really can be. It's such a huge job, and it's got such massive pressures. And there's too much to do. A common theme that came up from our CEOs was having to be a jack of all trades. You know, a number of them spoke about having to be the head of HR, finance, IT, digital, you name it. The small charity CEO wears all of those hats. And it's impossible to be an expert in everything. Yet smaller charities simply don't have the funding to seek that necessary external expertise. So it's on the CEO to do it.

Chris: Yeah. One CEO explained how they were campaigning for policy change one minute and they were ordering sandwiches for lunch next. So their job is constantly evolving. They're sometimes doing a job that they haven't done before or hasn't ever been done before.

Felicia: Absolutely. And they have to be expert at managing so many different conflicting stakeholders because they have to look after everyone, you know, the service users, the team, the trustees, the board. It's often just impossible. They also sometimes have to deal with very difficult trustees who might come from other sectors and don't invest in their own learning to figure out how the foreign impact sector is really different from the other sectors.

Chris: Yeah. I think another thing that really touched me was how vulnerable CEOs are. They are ultimately accountable for everything. And there's enormous pressure on them to reduce costs and staffing whilst doing more with funding, which is increasingly hard to secure. So some really, really interesting comments. And again, I want to say thank you very much for everyone for contributing.

But perhaps to just finish on one, the one that stuck with me is this. A charity CEO said that small charity CEOs are some of the lowest paid and least appreciated roles, yet they are the most critical jobs in our society. So clearly a really important topic for us to talk about and seems crazy that they're not supported more.

Felicia: I imagine a lot of this echoes what you're seeing working in the charity support work you do here at the Benefact Group, Chris.

Chris: Yeah, I think it does. We've been a funder for some time, but we've also been building support for charities for a number of years. And I think we've been keen not to just fund and run, work alongside charities to make our funding more impactful. I think that's kind of completely in our interest, isn't it? But what that's done, the experience has given us a real inside view of charities and a massive appreciation of what they do, what they're with. You know, Charity CEOs are incredible people. And maybe all funders should provide some additional support alongside their funding to give charity CEOs like a chance of being successful, but to really appreciate the challenging job that they are doing.

Felicia: Yeah, that would be great if all funders did that. Well, for this episode, we have three absolutely cracking guests lined up. Anyone in the sector will know their names. We've got Vic Hancock-Fell of Fair Collective, Deborah Alcock-Tyler, the CEO of DSC, and Gareth Orton, who's here to talk to us about the CEO in crisis service from ACEVO. So we'll go first to Vic Hancock-Fell, a small charity expert who runs the non-profit freelancing agency, Fair Collective, and is a huge advocate for the sector and its leaders.

It's great to have you with us today. So I wanted to talk to you about the CEO role. As long as I've been a consultant, I've seen stressed out charity CEOs. I think having the background of being a CEO myself means that CEOs know that I'll get it. So I find myself hearing a lot of stories from CEOs about how stressed, overwhelmed, even broken they are. And a lot of the time, the stories I've had over the past eight or so years have been based on their relationships with the board and often with their chairs. But I think something feels like it's changing and I'm seeing it seem to get worse. I'm seeing a lot of movement out of the sector from some really great CEOs and just an enormous amount of stress being expressed due to current conditions. And I'd just be interested to know, is this something you're seeing too?

Vic: Yeah, I think it's always been felt, but it seems to be getting worse and worse every year. Certainly something that I felt when I was in a small charity CEO role, felt it so much that I kind of created my own peer support network to deal with the fact that it was so stressful and so high pressured. So I created a Facebook group to try and connect with other small charity CEOs who were working in my sector and very quickly realised it wasn't just me and that a lot of people were feeling isolated and overwhelmed and feeling the kind of weight of the world on their shoulders.

But in the last few years, things seem to have really shifted. I don't know whether it's a sort of post-COVID, post-pandemic period type of response, or whether we're seeing the effects of austerity coming through in a really difficult fundraising landscape or whether people are just themselves generally having a more hard time, which makes the hard time that they're

having at work even more difficult to deal with. But for small charity leaders in particular, it seems really bad at the minute. And now I'm in a lot of these peer support communities still. I'm the chair of a small charity still, so I'm kind of in the front lines in a way still. And the kind of things that I see in these communities are really, really worrying. People's mental health and well-being is being really affected by their work, by their involvement. I think it goes across the board, but in particular, small charity CEOs are sort of facing the brunt of it. So yeah, it seems like a really particularly hard time for small charity leaders at the minute.

Felicia: Yeah, absolutely. Why do you think it's so tough for small charity leaders specifically?

Vic: Oh my God, how long have you got for this one? I know you relate to so much of this. There are so many things, I think, and this is in no particular order. One, I think, is the loneliness and isolation that you can feel as a small charity leader. If you are the only member of staff at your charity, if you are the only senior member of staff and you've maybe got a couple of more junior members of staff, if your board isn't particularly supportive or engaged, you can feel as if really everything is on your shoulders. And not only that, you have to be an expert in strategy development, program design, monitoring and evaluation, fundraising, finances, HR, you name it, it's your job.

And the stress that that creates, knowing or realising that you're supposed to become an expert in all of these different areas, I think, can be really overwhelming, especially when lots of people end up in that role because they're perhaps more of a big picture thinker, they're a strategy person, they're a sort of strategic problem solver, and now suddenly they have to become an expert in the ins and outs of gift aid regulations or HR law. I think there's something about as well being a small charity leader, you know, you're very kind of emotionally connected to the cause often. It could be that it's something that's affected you yourself personally; you founded a small charity or you decided to take on a CEO role in a small charity because the cause is something that you personally relate to, and so there's that emotional connection that makes every decision all the more difficult.

Or maybe you don't have a personal connection to it, but you are very connected to the work because there aren't that many degrees of separation between you as the CEO and the person who's coming in to use that service. And so small charity CEOs are often really close to the work that they're doing. And I've seen that play out for myself personally and for peers as direct trauma, as secondhand trauma, as compassion fatigue, you know, just completely exhaustion and thinking if I don't get this grant, if I can't make this fundraising target, I know that person who I saw yesterday is not going to get the support that I know that they so desperately need. So the personal pressure is immense, I think, for small charity leaders where you know it falls all back to you. You know the personal and the human kind of lives that are at stake if you can't get it right. And ultimately, it's probably not your fault, it's just the landscape that we're in unfortunately that is getting more and more difficult.

I'm sure there are so many other things that make life as a small charity leader especially hard. But those are the things that I hear consistently. I'm lonely, I'm isolated, I'm overwhelmed, there's too much for me to do, you know, it's all on my shoulders, I know what's at stake if we don't get this right. And unfortunately what I hear a lot is that boards

aren't supportive. I'm a chair of trustees myself, I've worked with excellent boards in the past, but I've also worked with and had my fair share of really quite appalling trustees and board members, and that can really make it or break it, and that's one of the things I always talk about in my training with small charity leaders.

Day one, task one, assemble yourself an amazing team around you, whether that's your board members, volunteers, staff members, freelancers, but it's impossible to do this alone. So I think one of the real challenges that we're seeing at the minute is boards who are really ineffective or at worst damaging, bullying and harassing, which is really awful but sadly quite prevalent. I don't know if you find that, yeah?

Felicia: Yeah, very common and unacceptably common. I mean, I've had my fair share of appalling boards. As you say, I've also had brilliant boards and brilliant chairs, but I've had a couple of doozies. And it's very hard, I think, when you're in those roles to see outside that when you have so many people relying on you, and then so many people above you, and you end up being that pressure point, I think, between those two groups. And if you have inappropriate pressures from your board, it's unmanageable, I think.

Vic: Yeah. And those helpful suggestions of just sending an email to Richard Branson or have you checked the Times 100 rich list? It's like, wow, didn't think of that.

Felicia: Nobody's ever thought of that before. One of the things you've been doing recently as well is research into the power of small, haven't you? What are some of the key things you've been finding through that work?

Vic: It's been so interesting. So this is a piece of work that Fair Collective is doing alongside NCVO with a view to finding out what small charities really want from infrastructure support, what they really need from infrastructure support. So we've seen in the past, we've had organisations like the FSI, like Small Charities Coalition, and we've still got organisations like NCVO and NAVCAR, and so many sort of smaller kind of micro infrastructure organisations, we've got Charity Excellence Framework, we've got Cranfield Trust, we've got all these individual people like you, like me, and like others in the sector. So we know that there's this really rich kind of ecosystem of support. But we also know that it's not currently serving small charities quite as well as it could. We still know that we've got these issues of people feeling isolated and unsupported, and they're not sure where to go, especially since the closure of Small Charities Coalition in the FSI.

Felicia: Now it's a big deal.

Vic: Yeah, totally. I mean, to lose two in two years is pretty terrifying kind of snapshot of where we are as a sector, I think. So we initially did some desk research to look at what was already there, like, what do we already know about this? We are absolutely not the first people to think about this or to do some research into how we can better be supporting small charities. And then we've complemented that desk research with some new research that we've done over the last few months, with small charities, small charity leaders, very co-production approach to kind of working with a group of 10 lead organisations who've then gone out into their communities and had conversations. We've had a survey out, and

we've had focus groups and interviews. And I think all in all, we've probably touched maybe 700, 800 individuals through this second phase of the research, plus all of the desk research that we did originally.

And what has been like really mind blowing, I mean, it's not a surprise in any way, but it's been really interesting to see how significant this has come out, number one thing, the funding system is broken, and we need you to help us fix it. Otherwise, absolutely everything else that we try to do is going to be difficult. So whilst we know the funding system is broken, you and I all know that only too well, as I'm sure will lots of the listeners, I don't think we quite appreciated how fundamental it is to everything else. And what we heard loud and clear is, unless we fix this broken funding system, nothing else can work.

Broken funding systems are linked to the well-being of charity leaders and fundraisers, because they're really stressed out about not being able to hit their targets, or they've got a 20-page application to get a £1,000 grant. Poor funding practices are linked to organisations not being able to grow, because we can't get core funding, funders don't want to pay for salaries. Poor funding processes, poor funding practice is linked to organisations not being able to just breathe, you know, small charities who can't just get on with their work week in, week out, because they're constantly on that hamster wheel of we've got to get funding, we've got to get funding, we've got to innovate, we've got to do something different, when they've got a perfectly successful, impactful initiative, but they just can't get money for it, because we need core funding, we need to get money for this project that is 20 years old, not this new, exciting, sort of, innovative new project.

So about 75% of the survey respondents that filled in this survey listed better funding as their number one priority. So it wasn't just kind of a smidgen ahead, it was like masses, significantly ahead of everything else. And the other things are still things that people want and need, like we do want practical support and training and guidance and advice and documents and templates, and we do want peer support, and we do want to be connected and convened, and we do want well-being support, and we do want our infrastructure organisations to influence policy on our behalf and all of that.

So yeah, we want all of those things, but the sort of megaphone kind of result that we're hearing is small charity leaders shouting from the rooftops, we need you to fix this damaged, this broken funding system, otherwise we're constantly going to be on these broken foundations, just trying to make the other things work, but not really being able to. Loud and clear, funding is broken, not enough core funding, application processes and reporting processes are broken, funders don't understand small charity needs, sort of funder whims, making application processes and getting funding really difficult. And so what we've got is the difficult challenge of how to do something about that, when we are ourselves, many of us, organisations that might be funded by the funding sector. There's definitely that sense of, well, we don't want to bite the hand that feeds, but also the hand that feeds is the problem.

Felicia: That's one of the reasons I love the link on LinkedIn, which is the crappy funding practices. I love the fact that they are openly calling out these appalling practices. Now, obviously, it's US based, and I feel like we need one in the UK, because there are some

appalling practices out there. And unsurprisingly, these issues have come across in these podcasts we've been doing. So in the first one, we talked a lot about how this obsession with overheads and the fact that how much a charity spends on overheads tells us nothing about its impact, but there's such an obsession with that.

And in the impact, the second episode, we talked about how even things like measuring our impact, which is our reason we're here, our bottom line is an overhead and people don't want to fund it. So it does feel like these funding issues are so massive. They're like the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy of needs for the charity sector make our own hierarchy needs and funding is going to always be the thing at the bottom, because we can't engage in reflection or development or any of those other things if we don't have the money and the space and the time to do that.

So if you've got someone listening to this who's a Charity CEO who is struggling, feeling alone, doesn't know what to do, where to turn, what advice would you give to that person?

Vic: Firstly, I would say definitely not the only person that's feeling like that. And maybe that's some comfort to know that if you're feeling like it's all really hard, or suddenly it's got much more hard, then you're definitely not the only person to feel that way. Module one of my kind of small charity training course, like I mentioned earlier, is always first priority, assemble your team, like do not attempt this alone, however tempting it might feel to just kind of open your computer or your notepad one day and just kind of buckle down and just get on with it, do not do that.

Take time to curate an amazing board of trustees, to get an amazing chair, to find some volunteers, to find your peers. And I think, if you haven't got an amazing chair, that's always my number one kind of suggestion is, I know it might not be easy, but find a way of having an amazing chair, and then that amazing chair can help you build the rest of an amazing board. And if you don't feel you're able to sort of navigate that on your own, then find yourself a peer network of people who have been through it, who are going through it, who have done it successfully, that you can get support from, that you can get ideas from.

There are also so many amazing organisations, like I mentioned earlier, where you can access pro bono support, pro bono coaching. There are organisations like Ella Forums, where you can get together with charity leaders. There are organisations like Cranfield Trust that provide pro bono management consultancy. There's the whole pro bono network that is, I think, managed by Pilotlight. So there are just so many places out there that are able to provide support. Whatever your perfect kind of Avengers team looks like, it might be trustees, it might be volunteers, it might be external organisations, it might be your peers, it is imperative to assemble those Avengers before you attempt anything. And that is my number one piece of advice.

Felicia: Well, I actually did an Ella Foundations course years ago, maybe like 10 years ago. And I'm still in touch with some of the people I met there. And yeah, it was really good. I remember one of the best things it taught me, there was a stress section, and the woman came in and said, you are never going to find the right time to go on holidays. So make sure you book your holidays at the beginning of the year, and then they are sacrosanct. For no

reason will you not go on those holidays. And make sure you have something to look forward to every six weeks, even if it's just a short weekend away.

And obviously, we had lots of different sessions and lots of different things. But that has stuck with me. And to this day, I still as a freelancer, because again, I work with organisations in crisis a lot, there is always a reason why it's not a good time to go away. And it's such good advice, just to make sure you always have that space where you do give yourself that break away. And the peer support thing, absolutely, I did the same thing assembled a group of peers, I call them my awesome women's group, because they're all women CEOs. And they've been such a source of support and sense checking and sanity checking and all those kind of things when you're going through a tricky CEO role. So absolutely.

Well, thank you so much for your time and wisdom. It's fantastic to have you on the podcast. And I really look forward to seeing all this research come out.

Vic: Yeah, we look forward to sharing it. Thanks so much for having me.

Felicia: That was Vic Hancock-Fell. Next up, we have Deborah Alcock-Tyler, the Chief Executive of the Directory of Social Change. It's absolutely amazing to have you on the podcast. You literally wrote the book on being a charity CEO: It's Tough at the Top. And so my first question is, why is this such a tough gig?

Deborah: Well, I think it's so people often think that it's tough because there's a lot of work to do. But actually, in my experience, you don't have much more work to do as a chief executive than anybody else in the organisation. We all have lots of work that we need to do. I think the tough part of it is the weight of responsibility. It's the fact that you carry the can for the entire organisation, and it's kind of the emotional consequences. Because if you think about it, in a business, the chief exec of a business, if things go wrong, people lose their jobs, shareholders lose their investment, etc. And that's stressful and horrible for everybody concerned.

But in a charity, you have all of that. And on top of that, you have the fact that if your charity fails, your beneficiaries no longer get served. They don't get the counselling, the therapeutic service, the bed in the hospice or whatever it is that your charity provides. And so that can feel like a very, very heavy weight for a chief executive.

And the second thing that I think makes it particularly tough is that there's only you between a voluntary board of trustees and all of your staff. Everybody else has a team. The board has a team. The staff have a team in one way, shape or form, but you're it on your own. And that can be the most gobsmackingly, agonisingly lonely place in which to be.

Felicia: Absolutely. I talk with a lot of CEOs in the work that I do, and a lot of them share the stresses and challenges they have. But it really has felt to me like things are getting worse in the last few years. I'm seeing more people leave the sector. I'm seeing the kind of the mental health issues being raised by CEOs coming up more and more often. Do you feel like the situation is getting worse?

Deborah: Well, sort of yes and sort of no. So it's always, always been tough, and there is a cold, hard reality about being a chief executive. You have to be incredibly resilient. And what I mean by resilient is not like ploughing on until the edge of the cliff and then falling over. I mean, being able to respond to setbacks, to not let things knock you, to be able to stay positive and motivated and forward thinking. So it is a tough job. And not everybody has that ability. And there's no shame in that. You know, not all of us can be as resilient in all situations as everybody else can. So from that perspective, I think it's not tougher. It's always been difficult. We've always struggled for money. We've always had challenges.

However, I do think in the last probably four, five, six, maybe even, well, certainly in the last five or six years, we've had additional challenges in our sector. So we've always been a little bit of a victim of some of the culture wars. But I think that's really been ramped up over the previous years. And of course, we see some of the results of those culture wars happening right now on our streets and in our cities. And that's as a result of this ramping up of like minimising the values and the experiences of other people.

So I think that has been a massive added pressure on chief execs just recently. It's not just the money. It's not just the keeping the organisation afloat. It's not just about dealing with your board or working with your staff or volunteers, or the emotional impact of the beneficiaries that you serve. On top of that, there's the fact that very often for many of us, we're having to fend off hate and abuse and all the rest of it. So I think from that perspective, it's definitely challenging.

Yes, the money's hard. There's no doubt about that. I mean, I've been nearly 40 years in the sector, and there have been brief moments when we've been awash with money, but they've really been brief. And like it's really tough at the moment, but it has been tough before. It will get better, then it will get worse again, because that's the sort of cyclical nature of voluntary organisations. So yes and no is my answer to that.

Felicia: One of the other things you wrote is easily my favourite book on governance, "It's a Battle on the Board". I honestly think this should be compulsory reading for anyone joining a charity board.

Deborah: Thank you so much.

Felicia: Well deserved. It's brilliant. A lot of the CEOs I speak with are struggling with their trustees, though I think they find a lot of them don't understand the impact focus of the sector or what their role is as a board member or as a chair, and they can make the charity CEO's life difficult and sometimes miserable. But to what extent do you think the structure of the charity sector with voluntary trustees who don't always have to understand the sector and its realities contributes to some of these unreasonable pressures on CEOs?

Deborah: I personally don't think that structure is ever really the problem. I think it's relationships that are the problem and understanding whose role is who. I think that very often chief executives don't feel brave enough for whatever reason to point out to their board how they could do things better, or they're not given the skills and the tools for navigating them. I think that the reality is whether you're a volunteer or not, charity trustees

have a responsibility in law and I think we forget to remind them of that. But it's like it's not that you do need to understand that if anything goes wrong, the fact that you didn't turn up to any of the meetings or you were difficult doesn't absolve you of the legal accountability.

So I get this too, Felicia, often when I'm talking to chairs and chief executives about the challenges they face. But I think that an awful lot of helping to get a good board and good governance is in the hands and the power of the chief executive. So the chief executive has an enormous amount of power over designing the agenda, making sure the information is right, making sure the information is presented at the right level. I mean, if you as a chief executive fall into the trap of providing 160-page board papers with detailed Excel spreadsheets and pages and pages of narrative, you've got nobody to blame but yourself if it either isn't read or if they dive into the detail.

So I always say to chief executives, don't be a victim of your governance, be an architect of it, like take control and just do better board papers, do better agendas, have the conversations, use things like the governance code to talk to your board about how they can be better trustees. Because my experience is most trustees want to do a good job: it's just the environment isn't always created to make it possible for them to do it. And I think there's a lot of power that chief executives have to make sure that that environment is the right kind of environment.

And I'd also say, Felicia, if you've got a difficult board, buy every single one of your trustees a copy of *It's a Battle on the Board* and then get them to discuss it at a board meeting. And that'll give you a starting point. Shame is plugged there. But I feel no shame because I don't make any money out of the book, it all goes to the charity. So no personal benefit to me.

Felicia: And I mean, it is something that has such value. I think there's a there's a quiz in there that's a bit tongue in cheek, but it's very powerful. I've used it at training sessions, which is which kind of trustee are you? And there are all the caricatures of these different trustees. And the one who comments on the comma that's out of place and that's their contribution or the one that's, oh, well, 20 years ago, this is what we're doing. And every single one of those characters I meet over and over again. And you do see some people doing this exercise kind of going, oh, okay, that's that's what I'm doing, actually. And it is really important to have that reflection. So shameless plug or not, I am completely on board with that. I do think it's a really fantastic book.

So there are a lot of CEOs out there at the moment who are struggling, especially in smaller charities where these funding arrangements are particularly difficult. So what would be your words of wisdom as someone with all of this experience and everything else that you bring? What would you say to those CEOs who are struggling at the moment?

Deborah: I mean, many of them are struggling for all sorts of different reasons. But I would say a few key things. I would say, first off, your financial performance is not a sign of your success and that most charities go in and out of good and bad funding patches, however they get their money. Your successes, the measure of your successes, are you achieving your charitable objects? Are you delivering fuel for your beneficiaries? And sometimes you

won't have very much money. And that's fair enough. And your job then is to do what you can do with the money that you've got until you can raise more money to do more work.

And I think we have to get out of this trap of measuring the performance of charities by how much money they've got or how many reserves they've got or whether they're growing, because that is not the measure of success of a charity. It's are you doing your job? And if you're serving 10 beneficiaries and you're doing it really well, good on you. If you're serving 1,000 and you're doing it really well, good on you. What matters is that you're doing the work that you're doing. So I would say that.

I would also say that life is cyclical. Things come and things go. Things get better, they get worse. I mean, and the older you get, I mean, I'm quite old now, and the older you get, you realise that everything passes. The trouble is, it's also the good stuff passes as well as the bad stuff. But you will have periods when things feel great.

I think the third thing is, that's kind of linked to that a little bit really, is that, and I hate the cliché of this, but I hope listeners will understand. It's not the destination when you're in a charity, really. I know I talk a lot about vision and working towards your vision. But really, the whole thing is a process of moving forward, moving forward, moving forward. You will never achieve the perfect structure, the perfect strategy, the perfect fundraising ratio. That just doesn't happen. And so that really, the most successful charities, and it comes back to my point about chief executives, the most successful charities are the ones that are resilient and in tune with their environments, the ones that can very quickly flex and change, that they can shrink back quickly if they need to, they can grow quickly if they need to, that they're really responsive to the environment.

If you pin down too much of a plan, I mean we've seen in the last few years anyway, plans are absolutely no use whatsoever, or they haven't been, since the pandemic really, but if you get yourself too attached to a plan, you're probably not going to succeed. What you need to do is have a general sense of direction, some key actions that you need to engage in, and then just be able to flex your way around them. I mean there's loads more stuff I could say, love yourself, look after yourself for goodness sake, try not to drown in the gin, although if gin is what's going to help me survive, feel free. I would never deny anybody access to gin.

But there is something really important about look after yourself. Take naps during the day for goodness sake, if that's going to help you navigate what's going on. Be more flexible in understanding about work-life commitments and that sort of thing. I've no idea if that's helpful, Felicia, but there you go.

Felicia: I think it's interesting that the flexing of charities, because one of the things I see a lot of is staff being very much a focus of a lot of CEOs' energy and emotional energy, because they do want to care for their staff. A lot of their staff might be out dealing with really quite traumatic situations in the work that they do, and a lot of CEOs find they have to support that, which makes things like restructuring or removing roles or downsizing, really quite challenging. And it's one thing I do quite a lot of as an interim or as a consultant coming in and helping organisations make the decisions that are in their object's interest,

not necessarily in the interest of their immediate staff. But I think that can be really hard for CEOs to do, but I agree that it's the way to do it well.

Deborah: Yeah, that's very true, although I would say that one of the really tough things about being a chief executive, of course, is that you're dealing with human beings and you can often get very, very attached to those human beings, you care about them, if you're a good chief executive you really do care about them. But the mistake some chief execs make is thinking that the staff is the job, and actually it really isn't. Your job as a chief executive is to deliver against the objects of your charity for your beneficiaries, that's the job. And sometimes in order to be able to achieve those objects, you're going to have to restructure, you're going to have to downsize, you're going to have to stop some services and lose some people. And you have to be able to do that. You have to be able to look somebody in the eye who you're really fond of, who thinks brilliant of their job, and tell them they haven't got a job because that's what you're paid to do.

Now, no chief executive can achieve the objectives of the charity without bringing the staff with them, and if your staff are miserable and frightened and fed up, that's going to be really, really hard to do. So I'm not saying at all that chief execs shouldn't care for this stuff, because of course they should, they need to make them feel involved, but when it comes down to the end of it, your job is to ensure that your charity delivers on its work and it survives, and that has to be the priority.

Felicia: Absolutely, that focus on the purpose of the public benefit of the charity, I think it can be difficult. I see boards doing it as well, not wanting to make these decisions. But actually, I think at the moment in particular where it is in a funding tighter stage, restructures, reducing staff numbers, those kind of things are so much more important than usual.

Deborah: I would say, why bother, why bother being a chief executive? Because you know, 80% of the job is like really boring, stressful, anxious, you're dealing with human relationships, sometimes you're thinking to yourself, oh for the love of all that's holy, will you just get on with it? It's like you often are having to deal with really not great stuff. However, the absolute, like the wonderfulness of knowing that you're leading an organisation that's helping other people, that's helping to make society better, that's helping to make people's lives better and communities better, in many cases actually saving lives, from my perspective that is worth every bit of the boring writing of the board reports, or the irritation when staff just are not getting on and not being grown up about relationships, or the funding not coming in and it really being a worry. All of that is worth it, absolutely worth it when you think about what you're delivering.

Felicia: Huge thanks to Deborah, such a pleasure to speak with her, she's an absolute sector legend. Finally, we have Gareth Orton, Member Services Manager for ACEVO, the Association for Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations.

So, one of the things I know you're involved with is the CEO in Crisis service, could you tell me a little bit about what that service is?

Gareth: Yeah, sure, so, I mean, CEO in Crisis is a client-led service, it really is kind of for what the member needs it to be. Quite frankly, if they define an issue that they're experiencing as being a crisis for them, one that's kind of blurring their clarity, blurring their ability to kind of work their way through the day-to-day, then we're here for them. We're here for any member who needs it. And yeah, there's no limit on the amount of time that we will spend with a member in terms of working them from where they are at present through to an end, that end being the end of the crisis.

And yeah, like I say, we've got primarily two, although we do have a team of associates too, all of whom are experienced former charity leaders who've got that lived experience of the unique challenges that are posed to a charity CEO, and adopt a range of counselling and coaching approaches to kind of help a leader work their way through where they are at present, and work their way through what it is that the CEO requires from us.

Felicia: So, with some of the people I've been speaking to lately, and certainly what I've been seeing across the sector, it feels like things are particularly tough for CEOs in charities at the moment. What are you seeing across that service in terms of numbers and trends, that kind of thing?

Gareth: We are seeing a very similar situation to that. There are a number of partners elsewhere in the sector are seeing, I mean, I suppose I want to kind of provide a little bit of context to start with if that's okay. I mean, I think we've done an enormous amount over the last few years to kind of get out there on the front foot with a suite of preventative, proactive events, activities, briefings and resources for members, which in turn I think has kind of raised an awareness of the support services that we provide at ACEVO. And I think that's, it's important context, because obviously what I don't want to do is just say, well, everything is doom and gloom. I think people are coming in because they're aware, more aware now, and I think that is inherently a good thing for leaders within the sector, that there is someone who's here for them and that can work with. So obviously, what we might not have is the context before an awful lot of that awareness raising work was being done, as to quite where things were and quite where the challenges previously being faced were.

That said, we do know that demand has gone up significantly. I've looked back over the last few years worth of CEO in crisis cases, this is new cases per year, we're talking about here, and since 2020-21, so we work on our financial year 2020-21, we've seen demand on for the service increased by 63%, so that's up until the end of the prior financial year 23-24. But we've also seen in addition to that over the first few months of this year, so April through to the end of August, we've seen that same period from 24-25 versus 2020-21 go up by 128%.

Felicia: That's huge. That's really incredible, isn't it? Do you have any insights as to why this is the case?

Gareth: So yeah, I mean I think there's an awful lot of incredibly good work that takes place within the sector. But I think the unique operating challenges within each charity are put under additional strain because of each of the challenges listed just there. So if you're facing a particularly problematic relationship between a CEO and a chair, or a CEO and a trustee, or a CEO and a fellow member of staff within the organisation, that's kind of presented against

a backdrop of everything else, what you see it's difficult, it's really, really difficult. And I think sometimes trustees, chairs, CEOs sometimes might not have had the clarity of thought that they would otherwise have had, that broader difficult operating context not being a kind of whirring away in the background.

So I mean we've seen that. But yeah, if we cut it back the challenges that we're seeing, they're the same types of challenges, they're not going away, they're not getting better. And like I say, the cold hard numbers suggest, if anything, they're actually getting worse. Now that could be because of the awareness of our service, or it could be that, like I say, things are just not in a great place in a number of different organisations. The types of challenges we see are problems in the relations between the CEO and the chair, or other trustees, I should add. We're seeing problems between the CEO and members of staff within their organisation. And sometimes where complaints are made, how those complaints are handled, perhaps aren't always handled quite as they could be, or should be against with due regard to governance processes and practice.

Burnout too, burnout of CEOs, again, everything that we've seen since 2020 or even earlier, we're seeing more and more CEOs just feeling that sense of overwhelm, seeing that sense of just needing to plot a new path, needing to plot a kind of some clarity through what it is that they're facing at that moment in time. And like I say, everything there just builds on each other, it creates that sense of crisis, and it blurs otherwise talented leaders in seeing what they may otherwise have seen, if it wasn't for the overwhelm of absolutely everything that they're presented with.

Felicia: So, from the perspective of the CEO in crisis service, what does a good result look like for a CEO who comes to you for support?

Gareth: So, the role of the CEO in crisis service is to provide that place of safety for a member who may otherwise have not had that made available to them previously, they may not have had someone to talk to who truly understands the type of challenge that they're facing, and we want to provide that place of safety for a member to open up and be able to reflect on what good does look like. Now, we know that good looks like something very different often at the beginning of their relationship with us, to good towards the end of their relationship with us. Now, good can mean staying within their role, staying within their organisation, and good can look like creating change either within the CEO's behaviour, it can look like good relating to improving and working on ways in which relations with between the CEO and staff or trustees can be improved for the future, it can be looking at ways in which process and practice can be enhanced for the future, that can be good.

What can also be good though is actually helping a member work their way through toward a position where they're comfortable or as comfortable as they can be with leaving the role that they currently occupy. And like I say, there's no right or wrong answer to what good looks like. I think it's really important that a member is given that space to think carefully about given what they've come to us with, given everything that's happened prior to the beginning of their relationship with us, what is it they need at the beginning and by the end of that relationship they're having with us.

Felicia: Great. I'm on a bunch of different networking groups with charity sector CEOs and you see a lot of these people in crisis asking for help and inevitably there is someone or many people often recommending the CEO in crisis service and ACEVO. And now I know that there is a three-month waiting period after joining ACEVO as a member before you can access that service and of course ACEVO doesn't just do the CEO in crisis service, it does a lot of other things, a lot of other ways of supporting CEOs. But what advice would you give to a CEO who isn't a member now but is finding themselves in a crisis now?

Gareth: In an ideal world, I'd recommend this to any leader before they even reach crisis point, which would be to say, prioritise finding your own network, finding a group and a trusted squad of fellow CEOs who understand what it is to lead a charity and the unique pressures and strains that that creates. Because I don't think anyone really truly understands how difficult being a charity leader is. And I think having that group of people who've walked that same path, who've faced those similar challenges, maybe framed in a slightly different way, but who've been there before and you can trust to bounce things off in a way that's you know what you're going to hear back is something that you can trust and something that comes from a position of similar lived experience, I think is really invaluable. So I'd always encourage any leader of a charity to make allowance for what they may need before they get to that crisis point and hopefully that will reap rewards for the future.

That said, I'd hope that any charity leader out there, any leader listening to this podcast would have at least a cohort of one or two trusted people within their network, be it through locality or be it through a shared operating context who they can pick up the phone to and just talk. I think actually having that ability to just share a challenge with someone is really important, obviously assuming what you're sharing with that person is something that the person is feeling comfortable in hearing because I recognise that some of the challenges presented to us may not be, some leaders may feel that they can't do that but with some things hopefully you can and hopefully there are those kind of trusted close people who you can connect with. But I really think it's important you invest in that network, invest in that squad before the bad times present.

It's difficult. I think beyond that it's invest in your learning, invest in your community, invest in your connections. Be it through ACEVO or be it through other organisations working within the sector, I think it's really, really important that CEOs find ways to connect with each other, build community, build that sense of belongs.

Felicia: It sometimes feels like the CEO role is unachievable, there's too much pressure, there's, too many things that can go wrong. Do you think this comes down to the structure of the charity sector?

Gareth: I think something that requires careful thought from the Commission, from the Association of through ACEVO and CVO and a range of different sector bodies is the governance model for the charity sector the right model now for the 21st century. There are a range of thinkers out there who will give you a very different answer on a very different day. I will say that we're doing an awful lot of work with the charity governance code and I know that there are improvements that are being looked at there to try and drive that change and drive ways in which things can be made better for the future, but it is difficult.

And when you've got so much of it that relates to the strength of a relationship between the cohort of trustees who are not within the organisation on a day-to-day basis or a chair who's not within the organisation on a day-to-day basis and the CEO, the importance of that relationship, particularly the CEO and the Chair, is much like kind of investing any CEO needing to invest in their network of peers to kind of be able to kind of bounce off. It's critical that any CEO and Chair invest in their relationship with each other.

It's something that we do an awful lot of work with the Association of Chairs on, a particular programme of ours, Dynamic Geo, which looks to kind of create that space for Chairs and CEOs to kind of get together and reflect on their relationship and I think whether it's through that or just through carving out the space and time for what success looks like for each of you and being clear on that it's just so, so important. It is difficult, because sometimes kind of the Chair and the CEO will have very different visions of what good for the charity looks like. It's difficult, like I say, it's uniquely challenging for a charity CEO. And I think any opportunity that can be taken by sector bodies to have a look at whether this model is still the right one for the here and now would be, I'm sure, welcomed by both Chairs and by CEOs alike.

Felicia: That was Gareth Orton. There's a huge amount to check out on the ACEVO pages and joining the organisation is to me an absolute no-brainer for all charity CEOs, even those not in crisis.

Chris: Just a huge thank you from me to all those guests as well. There was some incredibly interesting and useful views there, but hopefully also some massive reassurance for CEOs that they're not alone, and what you're thinking and feeling and the challenges you're facing, everyone else's too. I thought Deborah's summary of financial performance and not being a sign of your success, life being a bit cyclical and your work being a destination was absolutely fab. The success of a charity is about how well it fulfils its mission, regardless of what level of funding it can currently secure and I guess it's all very well me saying that. But CEOs need to feel and understand and be reassured by that and I think boards, trustees, society needs to appreciate that that's what CEOs are doing and they're doing a fantastic job.

Felicia: Yeah and I've seen this happen a lot with boards where you've got a lot of corporate trustees and of course they come from a background where that growth is the point, you know, the finances are the bottom line and it's really difficult for them to often be aware that growth is not always what a charity is there to do.

I do think one key message that came out loud and clear is around needing a peer group and I couldn't agree with this more, but to have all of our different guests on the same page on this was really telling.

Chris: I absolutely heard that loud and clear also and I was sat with three charity CEOs just this morning and we were talking about this topic. And I think what everyone wants to emphasise to CEOs is that they are not alone and they deserve support. So we are already planning a kind of CEO network, we've coined it a Founder Forum to give CEOs the means to connect, to spend some time to empathise with each other and learn from each other and I

think quite simply just to be appreciated for the huge role that they do. So if you're listening and you're a CEO and are interested, watch this space because it's something we want to launch soon.

Felicia: Fantastic, that's wonderful. So absolutely know anyone listening that you're not alone and that's such an important message to hear. I think a lot of the CEOs I talk to feel so much like they're on their own and there's no one else around so that that's brilliant. I think also, some of the messages that we had coming through from our guests were, if you can influence the composition of your trustee board, then do. This isn't always possible and there might be some listening who are thinking, well, I'm not allowed to, and some of the worst boards I've worked with would not have allowed CEO involvement at all. Hopefully, if you have a halfway decent board, they will allow your voice in the process and maybe you can get some fantastic trustees on, really help you and support you.

Another message that came through is about seeking out support. There is support out there, so places like ACEVO, also Fair Collective, Small Charity Leaders Program, there's consultancy support. You know, a lot of us out there in the consultancy world have seen a lot of this before and can help. There's other infrastructure bodies, although fewer than we used to have, and social media groups as well. There's one, the Small Charity CEO Group on Facebook. I'm still participating in that one. It's really useful, people are very keen to help and share their experiences.

And finally, as comes up over and over in our podcasts, I think we have to acknowledge that there is something fundamentally wrong behind all of this with our funding system, with the structure of the charity sector. You know, we all need to speak up about that and see what we can do to change it. This work is so important and we need it to function effectively.

Enormous thanks to all our guests today, and of course, to the Benefact Group for supporting this podcast.