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Ros Atkins and the 50:50 Project at the BBC (C)

In the summer of 2022, the 50:50 Project leadership was taking stock after three tumultuous years. It wasn't just the Covid-19 pandemic; leadership transitions, organisational structure changes, and questions about mission and scope were adding up for 50:50 and the BBC as a whole. The 50:50 Project had survived and thrived for five years, but what next, and how to keep going effectively in this new landscape?

Changes in the 50:50 Project

April 2019 was a great month – the first BBC-wide Challenge was a success and work was underway to expand 50:50 even further across the BBC. But for Ros Atkins, things started to shift:

"I used to pride myself on being in the detail with all the data and all the different aspects of what we were doing. But I simply couldn't do it anymore with the size of the project. I felt like it was undermining my ability to lead 50:50."

Then came a moment of clarity. In early 2020, Atkins met with senior BBC leadership:

"As I sat in that meeting, listening to the Director-General and his team outline how ambitious they wanted to be with 50:50 internally and externally, any doubts that I had had about handing the project over evaporated. It felt crystal clear to me that turning over the reins was the right decision – the culmination of a long evolution of me becoming less and less central to the running of 50:50."

BBC leadership was supportive and a strong contender for Atkins' successor was obvious. Nina Goswami, a career journalist on the BBC's News at Six and Ten, had been part of 50:50 intermittently since 2018:

"At that moment I was thinking about my own career next steps, having been in BBC News for about nine years. I felt that someone like me from an ethnic minority [Indian] background could connect well with 50:50's next steps, see where it needed to go, and be a persuasive voice to get it there."

Atkins officially handed over the reins to Goswami in May 2020. After the first few months, when Atkins felt like he had perhaps pulled back too far, they settled into a cadence whereby Atkins was invited to participate in weekly 50:50 team meetings and had at least a monthly catch-up with Goswami.

This case study was written by Siri Chilazi, Research Fellow, Harvard Kennedy School; Aneeta Rattan, Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour, London Business School; and Oriane Georgeac, Ph.D. Candidate, London Business School.

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