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Insights into Great Relationships: Board Chairs and Executive Directors

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You can find many articles and tip sheets defining the roles of board chairs and executive directors, including those admonishing board chairs that it's their role to "support" the nonprofit's executive director. We were curious – what does that "support" look like? And what does it take to have a great relationship between a board chair and a CEO? While some consultants suggest that success in this all-important relationship stems from an intellectual understanding of the separate roles (who does what), [research](#) has also explored the dynamics of the relationship itself – and discovered that the relationship, whether one of "facts-sharing," "ideas-sharing," "knowledge-sharing," "feelings-sharing" or "give and take," is enhanced by trust. What if instead of worrying about whether a board chair is stepping over the line by micro-managing, the executive director and board chair focused on building trust?

How do you build a trusting and supportive board chair/executive director relationship?

We asked the CEOs/executive directors of state associations of nonprofits in our network to share what helps makes their relationships with their board chairs successful. We heard how board chairs and executive directors can encourage and

energize each other simply by being fully present and listening to each other. We also heard that working on the relationship takes time, and that trust stems from communicating regularly and honestly. Below, nonprofit leaders share insights about three practices they use to build trusting relationships with their board chairs:

Carving out frequent and regular time together:

- We try to meet regularly - even weekly if possible - to discuss both board and organizational dynamics.
- We have a weekly call, every Tuesday at 8am. Since she is out of the area this is how we feel connected to each other and our work.
- We visit at least monthly for lunch or coffee.
- We schedule monthly calls to discuss issues.
- Board Chair and CEO meet weekly for planning, idea generation, general support.
- Our best practice is a meeting of the Chair, Chair-elect, and CEO every other week. We spend from 30-60 minutes together each sharing whatever is on our "list." Trust and transparency are the key.
- We schedule one hour calls for the first Tuesday of each month to catch up and review what's ahead. We have done this every month since [the chair became chair].
- We also schedule calls the day before the board meetings to review and make any final changes.

Seeing each other not only as people with a role to play, but also as a resource offering expertise to each other:

- I have a monthly conference call with the board chair and vice chair that precedes our monthly executive committee meeting. This call allows me an opportunity to talk not only about matters that will come before the board, but also to gain advice about situations I am handling.
- We get together regularly. We strategize together - both in terms of board engagement and also in terms of how to shape/re-organize current/new programs to better meet our strategic vision.
- We have built a strong rapport by striving to understand each other's perspectives and the skills and knowledge we bring to our roles; listening to understand each other and being willing to experience discomfort.

- I meet monthly with my board chair over breakfast. We discuss a whole range of things – personal and professional. My board chair is someone I trust to speak openly about my overall concerns or what my expectations are. She also provides me with that in return.

Intentional focus on the work it takes to build and maintain a relationship:

- Like all good relationships, it starts with open, honest communication. I let her know when I'm worried about something and I share our successes.
- We are intentional about keeping alive a culture of honesty so we can have frank discussions in a "safe space."
- We meet regularly over lunch, review our agenda and dedicate plenty of time to how we both are feeling about [the organization] and our individual relationship.
- Through our monthly lunches we ensure regular, open, honest, and direct communications.
- Communication! It all boils down to communicating on a regular basis which builds trust, not only in the partnership, but throughout the entire organization – Board and staff.

Just for Board Chairs

If you are reading this because you were just elected board chair of a nonprofit, first: Congratulations for the recognition by your peers, and thanks for your service to the community. Next, you may be thinking, 'Whoa, now what?'

Don't worry, you've got this. If you love the mission of the nonprofit and are willing to put in the time to build a strong, trusting relationship with the executive director, as well as your colleagues on the board, you'll be a rockstar board chair. But just in case you'd like to remind yourself about HOW to be that rockstar board chair, you may want to read Joan Garry's post sharing a "[Five-star board chair checklist](#)." Yes, you should familiarize yourself with the [roles a board chair is expected to play](#), such as managing/facilitating meetings and overall good governance). But you'll also benefit your organization and yourself by spending time thinking about *why* a board chair is even needed and how that relates to the importance of having a great relationship with the executive director. Consider how hard it is for an executive director to hold the full board accountable, when the executive director is simultaneously accountable to the board. It's more natural for the board chair to

hold the rest of the board's feet to the flames. And in order for that to happen, the executive director has to be able to candidly, honestly, and fearlessly share concerns when it seems that the board is dragging its feet, distracted, or not engaged. Similarly, the board chair has to candidly, honestly, and fearlessly share the board's concerns relating to the executive director or the organization's performance. Unless there is a trusting relationship, those important conversations won't happen productively.

In case it's not altogether clear, the role of board chair is all about building positive, trusting relationships, because it also falls to the board chair to develop a trusting relationship with each other board member. You can do that by – among other things – making sure the board has time together outside the board room to get to know one another. (See [Leading with Intent](#), “The role of social time,” page 26, and “Invest in a Board's Culture,” page 51.) You will be respected as a leader when you show respect for your peers by making sure that all board members feel valued and have the opportunity to ask questions and share ideas during meetings.

In sum, it's the time and effort that board chairs, executive directors, and other board members commit to building relationships *between meetings* that create the foundation for strong, trusting, and honest relationships all around. These honest relationships are assets that your organization will be very grateful for whenever the board faces difficult decisions – and when everything's humming along, too!

Practice Pointers

Should the board chair vote? There is no universally correct answer and no external requirements or limitations. That decision differs from one nonprofit to another since it's reflective of the organization's culture – although sometimes the answer is set forth in the nonprofit's bylaws. In some nonprofits, the board chair only votes to break a tie, which reinforces that the board chair is a consensus-builder facilitating the meeting and decision-making process. At other nonprofits, the board chair – as a duly elected or appointed board member – participates fully in the decision-making process and votes on all motions (unless s/he abstains due to a conflict of interest, such as may happen if the vote is to approve the CEO's compensation).

Just finding time to meet with the executive director/board chair around and among your already busy calendar commitments can create unnecessary (but understandable) stress that can sabotage the relationship. Committing to a regular

time to meet may take that stress off the table. Perhaps share with each other in advance the issues you want to explore together so that you can each do some preliminary thinking on your own.

Crafting the board meeting agenda together is an activity that executive directors and board chairs find gets smoother with time. Consider checking in after meetings to evaluate what worked well and what could use a little improvement. Interested in more meeting tips? Here are [10 tips for effective meetings](#).