

SHERRILL K. WILLIAMS & KATHLEEN A. MCGINNIS



# **BUILDING THE GOVERNANCE PARTNERSHIP**

THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S GUIDE TO  
GETTING THE BEST FROM THE BOARD

SECOND EDITION

BoardSource®

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# INTRODUCTION

Much that has been written about chief executives and boards repeats a familiar refrain: When it is successful, the relationship is a balancing act — carefully choreographed, but at the same time prepared to shift, respond, and change when the balance seems off-kilter. A nonprofit chief executive manages the staff but is an employee of the board. In a constructive partnership with the board, he or she also provides essential leadership that engages and involves the board in governance. An effective chief executive is the spark that ignites the partnership and helps board performance move from ordinary to extraordinary.

According to BoardSource's *Nonprofit Governance Index 2010*, board work — in and between meetings — consumes a considerable amount of time from paid and volunteer leaders. Chief executives spend an average of 22 hours per month on board and committee work. The larger the board, the more time they spend (21 hours for small boards compared to 27 hours for large boards). Board chairs spend 19 hours and other board members spend 10 hours.

This book offers practical tips and perspectives to help chief executives as they guide this considerable investment of human resources. The qualities of a true partnership with the board — support, trust, honesty, forthrightness, respect, and understanding — must belong to both the chief executive and the board. Just like building any relationship, the process calls for hard work by both parties. But the rewards, including success for the organization and the chief executive, are worth the effort.

For the chief executive, the partnership involves working for, working with, and working the board. Working for the board, the chief executive has specific expectations around vision and accountability to live up to as he or she translates the board's collective thinking into practices and programs that fulfill the organization's mission. Working with the board, the chief executive shares knowledge and information to engage board members in asking the critical strategic questions that contribute to organizational effectiveness. Working the board, he or she primes board members to open doors to resources and relationships that make the organization the best it can be. The partnership between the chief executive and the board focuses on the organization's mission, with both parties bringing their appropriate skills and expertise to bear on the desired results.

This book offers seven rules for the chief executive to lead by, and to follow:

1. Make mission matter. Cultivate the board's passion for the mission; board members will be excited about the organization's work and dedicated to the cause.
2. Know the organization. Inspire the board's confidence by understanding the organization from the inside out — history, organizational culture, public perceptions, and community context.
3. Cultivate relationships. It's up to the chief executive to build habits and interactions that engage and involve the board in a constructive partnership.
4. Inform and communicate. Prepare board members for success by absorbing information, sharing it, and understanding the magic of real communication.
5. Facilitate a balance in roles and responsibilities. Clearly articulated expectations and constructive feedback help both board members and the chief executive hold up their ends of the partnership.
6. Structure the board's work. When the chief executive provides board members with an understanding of the organization and a process for the board's activities, it is easier for board members to be fully involved.
7. Plan for transitions. Have a plan in place and resources to turn to when either the board chair or chief executive position vacates. This allows the organization to keep the focus on the mission versus the crisis of leadership.

The board chair plays a critical role in developing a successful partnership between the executive and the board. Because open communication between the board chair and the chief executive is essential, each chapter of this book includes two first-person essays related to aspects of the chapter's theme: one from a board chair's perspective and one from a chief executive's. The chair's perspectives provide the board angle regarding specific topics, so that chief executives might take away a lesson or tip for the future in understanding why the board thinks or acts in a certain way. The chief executive's stories offer personal experiences from the field to bring the issues in each chapter to life.