



Are you on  
the board chair track?

# SUCCESSION PLANNING FOR THE BOARD CHAIR POSITION

---

The board chair role is one of the most important positions in a nonprofit — in fact, some would argue *the* most important position. As the leader of the body that has ultimate accountability and authority for the organization, the board chair is responsible for leading the board in the oversight, thinking, and support that are critical to good governance and organizational success. This is why board chair succession planning — as well as the identification and nurturing of promising board members — should be a priority and an ongoing activity for every board.

## BOARD CHAIR ROLE

A board chair must be knowledgeable about the organization — its mission, vision, values, programs, services, constituents, and resources — and understand its place in the larger framework of the community and the still larger sphere of local and national peer organizations.

To be effective, board chairs should have particular skills as well as a firm understanding of the role's responsibilities. The following list works as a board chair job description:

### **Key leadership skills**

*Personal qualities:*

- Be approachable.
- Be a good listener and communicator.
- Show integrity, respect, and humility.
- Be a strategist, visionary, and generative thinker.
- Be fair and open-minded, authentic and genuine.
- Be adept at group facilitation; encourage open communication and constructive debate.
- Be a student and a teacher.

### *Commitment to the board:*

- Engage board members to take ownership for the work of the board.
- Celebrate the hard work and achievements of individual board members and the collective board.
- Promote outstanding board development and governance practices.

### *Commitment to the organization:*

- Show an understanding of and passion for the mission, values, and work of the organization; encourage board members to show the same commitment.
- Uphold legal and ethical standards of conduct.
- Ensure board members and management speak with one voice in the community.
- Ensure transparency, compliance, and accountability for the organization's operations.

## **Key duties**

### *Partner with chief executive*

- Cultivate a strong, working partnership with the chief executive.
- Understand the key differences between the governance role of the board and the management role of the chief executive.
- Oversee the hiring, support, and evaluation of the chief executive.
- Assess and monitor organizational alignment with mission.
- Engage in strategic planning and program evaluation.
- Oversee fiscal affairs and organizational assets.
- Develop and maintain risk management safeguards.
- Groom and help develop the next board chair.

### *Manage board*

- Ensure that every member carries out the roles and responsibilities of board service within the context of their legal and ethical obligations (duties of care, loyalty, and obedience).
- Ensure that the board self-assesses its performance every two years; ensure a comprehensive board development plan.
- Serve as the contact for board members on board issues; ensure ongoing communication with the board.
- Adopt a work structure that efficiently supports the work of the board.
- Appoint board committee and task force chairs.
- Serve as ex-officio member of all committees.
- Help to lead and facilitate fundraising efforts; ensure all members support the organization financially.

### *Oversee board meetings*

- Develop a board meeting agenda in partnership with the chief executive.
- Preside at all board meetings and committee meetings or events as necessary.
- Be adept at group facilitation; encourage open communication and constructive debate.

### *Play a leadership role in community relations*

- Cultivate relationships with individual donors, funders, and other key community stakeholders.
- Serve as ambassador, advocate, and fundraiser for the organization.

## BOARD CHAIR DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

When you take all of the characteristics listed above into account, it should be clear that the board chair role is not for all board members, so don't leave it to chance. Don't find yourself pleading with an outgoing chair to stay on in the role or just appointing whoever volunteers for it. Instead, commit to and invest in board development overall and to developing emerging leaders in particular. Grow your board chairs.

### 1. Recruitment

During the board recruitment process, think about the long-term future of the board and organization and whether a candidate has the potential to provide leadership down the road. Does he or she exhibit some, if not all, of the personal qualities listed above? If so, support their candidacy.

### 2. Committee leadership

Are there board members who volunteer to take on new take on new responsibilities, who draw out the best in others, who offer constructive suggestions, who can be counted on to follow through with their tasks? If so, providing them with opportunities to lead — in committees, task forces, and fund development activities, for example — allows them to learn about the various facets of the organization, to test and prove their leadership, and to strengthen their leadership skills. Ideally, you will have several potential board chairs in the pipeline at all times.

### 3. Succession process

Some boards create a chair-elect position to secure future board leadership. In other boards, the individual serving as vice chair may naturally assume the role of chair (for this assumption to be automatic, it must be defined that way in the board's policies). The primary role and responsibilities of both of these positions are generally defined in the bylaws. You also should have separate job descriptions for each.

In general, the vice chair provides the board with additional and substitute leadership and fills in for the chair when he or she is absent. Both positions carry out special assignments as requested by the board chair, understand the responsibilities of the board chair position, are able to perform those duties in the chair's absence, and participate as a vital part of the board leadership, such as serving on the executive committee if one exists. Both positions are seen as leadership training grounds.

If the board has a chair-elect position, the election process often works in the following way:

1. A year out, the current board chair notifies the board that he or she will not be seeking re-election in a year's time. Normally, board chairs serve in the role for two or three years, though they are typically re-elected annually per the bylaws.
2. The board invites those interested in the position to submit their names to the governance or executive committee. These committees also may seek out specific candidates.
3. The full board reviews the candidates thoroughly. Individual candidates should recuse themselves from the discussion pertaining to him or her.
4. The chair-elect is elected by a majority vote of the board.
5. The chair elect then works closely with the current board chair for the remainder of the current chair's term to prepare for a smooth transition.
6. The board then elects the chair-elect to the board chair position.

### 4. Mentorship

Mentoring is a valuable leadership succession tool. During the year leading up to the transition in leadership, the board chair should address the following with the chair-elect:

- Role execution and responsibilities of the position.
- Challenging issues that emerged during his or her tenure.

## SUCCESSION PLANNING FOR THE BOARD CHAIR POSITION

- Unfinished board business.
- Status of strategic plan and future trends.
- Partnership with the chief executive.
- Building relationships with individual board members, community leaders, donors, and other stakeholders.
- Balancing competing demands at one time.
- Big-picture issues.
- Communications.
- Best governance practices.

Many organizations invite the incoming board chair to participate in the regular meetings or phone conferences between the current chair and the chief executive during the months leading up to becoming board chair.

Sometimes an organization will use other approaches for orienting a new board chair, such as seminars or workshops; online and print resources; community resources; guidance from other board chairs; and coaching and mentoring from an expert. An investment in developing a board chair who displays strong leadership skills and governance practices can benefit an organization for years to come.



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



[The Board Chair Handbook](#)



[Leadership Certificate for Nonprofit Board Chairs](#)