



# INNOVATION

## in Board Structure and Dynamics

**G**overnance may not be the sexiest topic on the planet, but we find that many of our members and colleagues find it endlessly fascinating and are continually looking for ways to improve their boards' performance. As one board member said, "This is a call to action. We need to question all of our assumptions. If we are to shape our future, we think it's healthy to take nothing for granted or as a given but be willing to hold everything up to scrutiny and ask the difficult questions."

Below we provide a list of BoardSource's most innovative thinking on board leadership and transition, with a two-part white paper, as well as an excerpt from a book examining the relationship between the board chair and chief executive.

["From Résumé to Repertoire: Finding the Right Nonprofit Leader"](#) (BoardSource White Paper)

["Transition to New Leadership: The First 1,000 Days"](#) (BoardSource White Paper)

Below is an excerpt from [\*Building the Governance Partnership: The Chief Executive's Guide to Getting the Best from the Board.\*](#)

## BOARD CHAIR'S PERSPECTIVE

The relationship between chief executive and board chair is a unique partnership. Each relies on the other to perform their role successfully. The two must be willing to blend their styles and approaches to leadership to produce a cohesive environment conducive to active involvement of the board and staff. There needs to be a strong understanding of our respective roles and responsibilities. If one of us is less experienced, the more seasoned person must find ways to help the other develop skills and abilities quickly.

The most effective boards are graced with skillful leaders in the chief executive and the board chair. Both should be effective communicators, and ideally both are viewed as equally open to feedback from board and staff. Through careful agenda development and meeting planning, the chief executive and board chair will convey a shared focus.

Close, working friendships often develop, but we as board chairs need to remain independent enough to evaluate the chief executive's performance and to respond to board members who express issues or concerns. Balancing a friendly, effective relationship with frank and open communication requires a strong chair and a willing chief executive who welcomes feedback.

I have served on some boards where the relationship between these two leaders is energizing and on others where the atmosphere is tense and argumentative. Both leaders share the responsibility to develop an effective relationship. When the chief executive experiences problems, the best course of action is to identify areas of difference. How does the board chair prefer communication to occur? Does the current job description adequately reflect the chair's view of what the chief executive should be doing? Does the board chair support the strategic plan or believe it needs revision?

To aid in the resolution of serious relationship issues, there are interpersonal skills techniques that the chief executive should develop. By applying such skills to situations where there is friction between the two leaders, the problems will be addressed as organizational issues rather than personal attacks.

- Demonstrate your own openness and approachability so the individual will be willing to have an honest discussion about differences in vision, strategies and whatever else is being disputed. Keep the focus on

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your desire to understand the individual's point of view.

- Diffuse anger and conflict focusing the discussion toward efforts to clarify and resolve differences. Ask clarifying questions such as: "Help me understand what you'd like me to do" and "What's one thing you would like me to do differently?"
- Learn how to read people. People are all different and identifying what motivates them, what their goals are and how they define success all help the chief executive understand how to work more effectively. Frame your suggestions based on how your "audience" will receive the message. Behavioral psychology sections in bookstores are good places to look for resources to help develop "people reading" skills. BoardSource's toolkit [Boardroom Chemistry: Getting Your Board to Govern as a Team](#) also offers insight on how successful boards have figured out how to make the most of the various relationships (chief executive to board, board chair to board, and board member to board member) so that the work of the board assumes greater importance than any individual or relationship.
- Use the strategic plan to help evaluate whether the issue is critical, nice but not necessary, or really not germane to the goals and objectives of the organization. Sometimes issues are the result of differing opinions about what should be the focus of the organization. Until this is resolved, the tension will remain.

Once the concerns are fully discussed, both leaders should have a common understanding of how best to fulfill the mission of the organization together. After all, that's what should be the driving force for all their actions.

### CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S STORY

When I first took a job as a chief executive, I was not certain that my level of maturity and experience was up to the task. I was somewhat astounded that I was selected for such a responsible position having never held a chief executive job before. I felt the weight of the world on my shoulders as I anticipated trying to live up to the organization's trust and expectations.

I set out to produce far more than the small organization was capable of and expected a far higher level of achievement than it was prepared to produce. I obsessed over every move to avoid a misstep or a failure. I believed that the board trusted me to do the right thing, and I was going to push myself into a froth to figure out what the right thing was, if I didn't already know — and there was a lot more I didn't know than I did know. I had also inherited an \$80,000 deficit and no money in the bank.

The staff thought I was crazy. They complained of micromanagement, and some headed for the hills, only adding to the stress. I developed an ulcer at age 30. Luckily, the board chair was a wise individual, experienced in the game of life. She told me that the board recognized my raw talent and my desire to make a difference. She shared that the board was in there for the long haul to work with me to bring the organization back to stability and then to growth. She reminded me that my role was to work with her to tap every treasure the board had to offer and provide the structure and support to board members to help put their treasures to work to benefit the mission. She provided the perspective I needed to invite her and members of the board to share ownership for the organization and stop thinking I should save the world alone. She reinforced that I was chosen for the position because I was 100 percent genuine. I knew myself, accepted who I was, and had a hunger to improve.

What a relief! I accepted that it was OK for me to be "just human," and that might just be the best part of me. Understanding that the board had to be a partner in my work as a chief executive was a wonderful gift that this board chair gave me. She worked with me to develop a list of immediate needs, organize meetings with board members to invite their participation and resources in stabilizing the organization, and inspire board members to take an active role in getting us back on track. She made board members feel confident that the organization was going places and convinced them that they needed to recruit new board and committee members to enjoy the success ahead. Within one year, our finances were stable, committees with fresh new leadership were in place, and non-doer board members were replaced by active participants eager to join the cause.

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Many new chief executives or seasoned executives who get off track may not be so fortunate. But we all can recognize when we're trying to be superhuman. Our heart races, we are impatient with others, and we toss and turn at night. We believe that no one can do it as well as we can. We have the weight of the world on our shoulders, and there's no one in sight to relieve us. When we recognize these signs, it is important to take care of ourselves, embrace our humanness and that of others, quiet our minds, organize our world, and reach out to others to share the struggle and the load. The chief executive and board need each other, working in partnership to be successful and to enjoy the life-enriching benefits that come from doing this important work.

### BOARD CYCLES

Sometimes the past repeats itself. In this excellent article, the author concluded that "it is essential that organizations understand that the behavior of boards is dynamic. As organizations continue to change and grow, so too will their boards — over and over again. Internal and external crises and contingencies provide opportunities for further board growth and development. Knowledge of the cyclical nature of boards may or may not help the board move more quickly through the various phases, but it can help to mitigate some of the detrimental behaviors of the board, as well as provide ways to build on its assets and strengths."

["Here We Go Again: The Cyclical Nature of Board Behavior"](#) (*Nonprofit Quarterly*)