



THE ROLE OF THE BOARD CHAIR

As the chief volunteer officer, the board chair is responsible for leading the board. This position demands exceptional commitment to the organization, first-rate leadership qualities, and personal integrity. The chair must earn the respect of fellow board members to be able to meet the challenges of this position.

Chair/Chairperson/President?

What should the chief elected officer be called? The least confusing title is chair or chairperson. As many organizations call their chief executive officer ‘president,’ to avoid confusion, it makes sense to reserve that title for a staff position and use chair or chairperson for a board position.

Leader of the board

To function effectively, groups need a leader. A board leader is approachable and available. He or she is objective and listens actively. He or she needs to be a strategist, knowledgeable about the organization and board practices, a coach, and a conciliator. Finally, he or she must be respected in the community. The chair most commonly performs the following functions:

- Serves as the contact point for every board member on board issues.
- Sets goals and objectives for the board and ensures that they are met.
- Ensures that all board members are involved in committee activities; assigns committee chairs.
- Motivates board members to attend meetings.

Facilitator of board meetings

One of the trickiest responsibilities of a chair is to run effective and productive board meetings. Effective meeting facilitators must be able to:

- Create a purposeful agenda and follow it.
- Know how to run a less formal and productive meeting.
- Engage each board member in deliberation.
- Control dominating or out-of-line behavior during meetings.

If the board chair is not able to lead an effective meeting, it is better to delegate that task to someone else (like the vice-chair) rather than risk unproductive or boring meetings.

Should the chair vote?

The chair has the same right to vote as other board members. Some chairs vote, while others abstain and vote only to break a tie.

Relationship with the chief executive

Both the chair and the chief executive of the organization need to support, consult, and complement each other. Both have their own responsibilities — the chief manages the operational activities and the chair leads the board. Both share power in their mutual pursuit to advance the mission of the organization. To make this happen, they need to communicate openly and regularly.

This partnership needs constant attention. Personalities change but the positions remain. Each partner needs to adapt to and cultivate the working relationship.

Think of the chief executive as the gatekeeper for the staff and the chair as the gatekeeper for the rest of the board. This helps to prevent miscommunication and it allows both leaders to stay aware of each other’s needs.

Succession planning

A well-conceived succession plan for leadership positions prevents too much power from being concentrated in the hands of a few. Start by recruiting board members with demonstrated leadership qualities to avoid running out of qualified candidates. Your governance committee should provide continuous opportunities and training for board members to create a pool of leadership candidates when a new election is in order.

Involve the full board in the leadership succession process. Define the necessary qualifications. The governance committee should consult with each board member for nominations and eventually, through feedback, bring a single candidate to the board for election. This process avoids the notion of winners and losers while stressing consensus and group decision making.

References

The Board Chair Handbook

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