

BOARDS

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Developing Your Board

Structured evaluation is key to successful engagement

The roles and responsibilities of boards and their members have been well researched and written about by experts in the field. Based upon my experience, knowing what to do and actually doing it are two different things. To unlock your board's true potential, boards need to constantly re-examine their own performance and make the necessary improvements that have been identified through their assessment process.

Two important aspects of improving a board's governance are:

- Selecting the board chair; and,
- Reappointing board members.

SELECTING THE BOARD CHAIR

The chair or president of the board of directors plays an extremely important role for a nonprofit organization. The chair and the group's chief executive are the two key people in steering a nonprofit toward its vision.

There needs to be a positive relationship between the board chair and the chief executive. A good chair works with the chief executive behind the scenes and stays in close communication with all board members. The chair of the board keeps track of the work of each board committee, plans meeting agendas, leads assessments of the board and chief executive, and helps recruit new board members.

As successfully outlined in *The Board Chair Handbook*, written by William and Linda Dietel, the duties of the nonprofit board chair bear little resemblance to the job of a for-profit board chair. Often in the for-profit world, the chair of the board is also the chief executive officer, and thus involved in managing the organization's overall operation. This is not true for most nonprofits. The board chair focuses on the big picture, keeping an eye on the institution's mission, vision, and long-term sustainability.

As the leader of the board, the chair helps the board as a whole to think strategically about the organization's achievements

for mission, vision and long-term goals, in the context in which it operates.

The board chair must be a strong strategic thinker who is able to make difficult decisions and willing to be accountable for the organization's sustainability. The role of the chair differs from organization-to-organization and even within an organization as it evolves over time.

While the board chair is the chief volunteer officer and is charged with leading the board, the entire weight of the board's work does not fall completely on the shoulders of one person. Rather, the board as a whole shares responsibility because it should speak with one voice. The board chair needs to delegate to and empower board members, encouraging each of them to take ownership of their assigned responsibilities.

Therefore, selecting the best person available for the board chair is crucial. Here are 10 specific actions that can be undertaken to identify and appoint your board chair:

- Immediately begin to assess the leadership talent of current board members.
- Ask your current board chair to begin as soon as possible to identify potential candidates.
- Institute ongoing board training for all board members.
- Offer the chair-elect a professional board coach/mentor.
- Ensure that the board's work is done efficiently.
- Find ways to reward and recognize your board members for the job they do.
- Provide opportunities for all board members to participate in a wide array of committees, task forces and advisory boards.
- Highlight the organization's continuous strides for excellence.
- Recognize former board chairs for their contributions.
- Recognize and address the reasons that appointing a board chair is difficult.

Recognizing some of the reasons that appointing a board chair is difficult can help you take early actions that will eliminate

this difficulty. Nonprofit organizations that are able to successfully transition their board's leadership in an effective manner will benefit everyone that is served by the mission of the organization.

REAPPOINTING BOARD MEMBERS

One of the board's major responsibilities is to ensure that a process is in place to evaluate an individual board member's performance prior to rewarding that member with a new term. To unlock your board's true potential, the board must continually evaluate each member's performance and make the difficult decision to appoint or not reappoint when it is appropriate and in the best interest of the organization.

This process really begins during the recruitment and orientation process, by explaining the expectations of each new member. It continues during each year through the board's educational activities and annual goal setting procedures. The expectations of each board member and the board as a whole should be an ongoing conversation. It should never be a surprise when a decision is made by the board not to reappoint someone.

If your board does not have a reappointment process, which includes a fact-based evaluation of individual performance against expectations, one should be developed immediately. Key aspects of this process are:

- Preparing a written job description for individual board members;
- Keeping attendance records for board and committee meetings for each member;
- Developing a target profile for representation (e.g., functions, professions, diversity, etc.) that you want for the board; and,
- Creating an annual checklist to evaluate the contributions of individual board members whose terms will expire

One final issue is knowing when and how to fire a board member. Everyone knows that board members are tremendous assets, providing needed expertise and leadership in furthering the mission and success

of an organization. However, occasionally an individual board member is not contributing or worse, can become destructive to the organization. The destructive or disruptive behavior can become a negative force to the workings of the board and executive team, resulting in poor morale among board and staff, loss of energy, increased board turnover and/or a damaged public opinion.

When disruptive behaviors are exhibited, the board chair – not the chief executive – has the responsibility to meet with the board member and discuss the behavior and the impact it is having on the organization. Often, the board member will become aware of the behavior and make the necessary changes.

However, when the discussion or counseling fails to solve the problem, the board member might need to be asked to resign. If the board doesn't face up to its responsibility, the problem could become a disaster for the organization and have long-term negative effects.

Just as the board holds the chief executive accountable and responsible for behavior, the board must do the same for its members.

While the vast majority of board members volunteer their time, energy and talent to their organizations, we must remember that they also accept the responsibility and accountability that comes with agreeing to serve on the board. To unlock your board's true potential, every board member needs to work together toward achieving the organization's goals, bringing fulfillment and meaning to all who serve in such a wonderful role. **NPT**

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