

FACILITATING AN ENGAGED BOARD

The Board Chair's Role

Successful organizations have engaged boards with members who are passionate about the organization's mission, who ask challenging questions and make informed decisions, who collaborate with each other, and who promote the organization and its work to their contacts. But engagement doesn't happen on its own. It must be fostered — and the board chair plays a key role in doing just that. It's not easy, however. Engaging a board in an organization's work requires strong facilitation skills and an understanding of each member's personality type, including the chair's own type.

This resource explains how the board chair can identify important indicators and use various facilitation techniques to build strong peer relationships within the board and foster engagement from the board.

THE ROLE OF THE BOARD CHAIR

The board chair is responsible for managing the board and leading its organizational oversight. Board chairs must be fully committed to the board, to the organization, and to ensuring both are in sync.

► Roles with the Board

- Engage board members to show a commitment to the organization's mission.
- 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.

► Roles with the Organization

- Show an understanding of and passion for the mission, values, and work of the organization.
- Uphold legal and ethical standards of conduct.
- Ensure board members and management (including the board chair and chief executive) speak with one voice in the community.
- Ensure transparency, compliance, and accountability for the organization's operations.

Board chairs who fully understand their governance responsibilities in relationship to the organization's goals and are cognizant of their own working style — strengths, challenges, communication preferences, biases, etc. — have an advantage in working strategically with both the board and CEO/executive director.

PEER RELATIONSHIPS

The board chair's responsibility to facilitate and foster engagement is dependent on his or her ability to build strong peer relationships among board members and a strong partnership with the CEO.

► Strong relationships and partnerships are characterized by:



Mutual respect, trust, and support



Reciprocal communications



Mission-driven, shared purpose

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► The Board

Fostering meaningful peer relationships ultimately leads to a more engaged board and stronger governance. The board chair should ensure the board meeting agenda includes informal social time (this often takes place during meals) when business is secondary and board members can get to know one another in a more relaxed setting. Additionally, incorporating “mission moments” in board meetings can help strengthen board members’ connections to the important work of the organization.

Strong peer relationships enable:

1	2	3	4	5
<u>Strategic Thinking</u>	<u>Culture of Inquiry</u>	<u>No Personal Agendas</u>	<u>Ethical Values</u>	<u>Inclusivity</u>
Board members feel comfortable going beyond surface level discussion to think strategically about the organization’s future.	With a foundation of mutual respect, board members engage in constructive debate to ensure they arrive at the best decision.	Board members put the organization’s needs before their own.	Board members trust one another and are accountable to each other.	Board members know that their opinions are valued and appreciated.

To start a conversation about the culture of your board and individual board members’ skills and opportunities for growth, consider [BoardSource’s Peer-to-Peer Assessment](#). It asks board members to evaluate their individual performance and that of their peers to learn how the performance and culture of the board is affected by the style and engagement of its individuals.

► Chief Executive

The board chair’s partnership with the CEO is the most important relationship he or she will have. An organization does not succeed if its two key leaders are not working collaboratively and fail to develop a culture of mutual respect and trust.

While the board chair is responsible for the overall governance of an organization and managing the board, he or she must leave the daily management of the organization to the chief executive.

Board chairs and CEOs who are committed to developing a strong partnership are attentive to the following:

Communication

- Foster open communication, ideally on a weekly basis. If possible, the board chair and CEO should schedule monthly in-person meetings as well.
- Cultivate a level of trust. The CEO should not be afraid to share problems or general concerns as they arise and, similarly, the board chair should not hesitate to keep the CEO informed of any concerns about board or organizational operations.
- Acknowledge each other’s contributions to the work of the partnership.

Expectations

- Set mutual expectations for the working relationship.
- Establish clear boundaries for roles and responsibilities and understand where they overlap.
- Agree on what sound governance practices are and how to apply them.
- Develop a shared interpretation of what constitutes the best interests of the organization.

Personalities

- Adapt to differences in personality, temperament, work style, communication style, and time commitment.
- Work within the limits placed on the relationship, such as those established in agency bylaws and policies or by a national association or accrediting body.
- Keep individual egos in check, and don't compete for the limelight.

The partnership between the board chair and the chief executive serves as the face of the organization, making it worthy of an investment in time. When strong, it can propel an organization toward greatness.

BOARD MEETINGS

The foundation of most strong board relationships is a communal commitment to the mission of the organization. Board meetings provide an opportunity for board chairs to transition this commitment to actual engagement in high-impact governance and organizational success.

The board chair is responsible for facilitating board meetings. Oftentimes, nonprofits will delegate facilitation responsibilities to the CEO, but that is unwise. While the CEO is an important part of all board meetings, his or her role should be to introduce pertinent organizational issues and contribute to discussions when appropriate. The chair, as the leader of the board, is uniquely positioned to lead meetings and facilitate discussions.

Board chairs should not approach their facilitation responsibilities lightly. Most chairs will need training — either formal or informal — in proper facilitation techniques. No matter how strong a board's culture may be, meetings will not be effective without a skilled facilitator at the helm. Chairs should start their preparation well in advance to ensure that all meetings run smoothly.

► Before the meeting

- **Become familiar with basic meeting procedures.** While all board chairs should have a basic knowledge of parliamentary order, it is up to each chair to determine the level of structure he or she wants to follow. Some board chairs choose a more structured approach and refer to a professional meeting reference guidebook (such as Robert's Rules of Order); others take a more relaxed approach to parliamentary order. The chair shouldn't be afraid of breaking from convention.
- **Identify and explain personal philosophies of running meetings.** After board chairs receive training, they should identify their preferred facilitation techniques. Before their first meeting as board chair and before any meeting with new members, board chairs should explain their style and attitude to the full board and any other meeting participants. This will help to create a mutual understanding of what is acceptable and will allow the board chair to highlight any relevant aspects of his or her preferred meeting procedures.
- **Know the board members.** One important way to ensure every board member is engaged and involved in discussions is to get to know them. This can help the chair identify who might bring a unique perspective to a specific discussion item and how more quiet board members can be encouraged to participate.
- **Plan ahead, but don't come to any conclusions.** Being prepared for board meetings is one of the board chair's chief responsibilities. Crafting the agenda — in collaboration with the CEO — and identifying key talking points for big issues ahead of time will help guide the discussion. However, the board chair should be careful to not come to any foregone conclusions about the outcome of a discussion. Doing so can lead the chair to inadvertently steer the conversation in his or her preferred direction.

About the board chair-CEO partnership

To learn more about the board chair-CEO partnership, download this infographic detailing key roles, shared responsibilities, and outcomes.

Download Strategic Board Meetings

The board chair is not the only one who is carrying out responsibilities during a board meeting. This resource discusses the roles of the board chair, chief executive, board members, and senior leadership both before and during the meeting.

► **During the meeting**

- **All board members should have an opportunity to speak.** Each board member was nominated and elected to the board for a reason. Ensure that everyone gets a chance to weigh in and that no one dominates the conversation, especially on major discussions. This may require board chairs to pay special attention to involving more quiet or introverted board members.
- **Keep participants engaged and interested.** In addition to ensuring everyone has a chance to speak, board chairs also must be aware of the engagement and interest levels of the room. Spending too long on an issue can lead to fatigue, which might impact later discussions that are of equal importance.
- **Guide discussion.** While all board members should feel free to speak their mind during board meetings, sometimes discussions can veer off track or get stuck on minute details. The board chair should always be ready to tactfully steer conversations back to the issue at hand or expose facets of the discussions that board members may not have uncovered.
- **Ensure the board is engaging in strategic, high-level discussion.** Are board members questioning assumptions and putting forth new opinions? One of the board’s most important tasks is to provide strategic oversight for the organization. That requires going beyond surface level discussions to a more in-depth consideration of creative solutions. Come prepared with questions that encourage generative thinking.
- **Be objective and fair.** Board chairs should not be afraid of controversial issues and opinions — the board should be able to have an open discussion without judgement. Board chairs should also be careful not to let their personal opinions influence their facilitation. Once the board chair has determined that an item has been fully discussed and all board members have weighed in, he or she is also charged with bringing the board to consensus.
- **Stick to the agenda, but allow for flexibility.** A good agenda is designed with the flexibility to allow additional discussion time for items when needed. It is important to prepare an agenda ahead of time, but it can be difficult to predict which items will spark debate.

PROCESS FOR DELIBERATION

When there is a big issue that needs to be discussed at a board meeting, it is important for the board chair to approach the deliberation effectively to ensure a good conversation and a successful result.

1

Explain the item(s) to be discussed.

- Introduce the topic without including any personal or outside opinions that could influence the discussion.
- Explain key points, define the item being discussed, and explain why it is important to the organization.

2

Identify what needs to be accomplished.

- Ensure everyone is on the same page and in agreement.
- Frame the issue carefully to eliminate contention (e.g., reminding board members the discussion is not personal or letting participants know a conclusion does not need to be reached immediately).

3

Lead the discussion.

- Using the facilitation techniques outlined earlier, encourage an open discussion and make sure every board member gets a chance to speak. Board members should raise their concerns while thinking strategically about the issue at hand.

4

Search for solutions and options for action.

- Ask for feedback.
- Ask for alternative solutions.
- Look for mission connection.
- Assess the need for resources.