

The Job of the Chair

This chapter summarizes information from *The Board Chair Handbook*, published by BoardSource, and other articles.

Does this sound like you? Would you apply?

Wanted:

A board chair with wisdom and intelligence; a decisive leader with excellent organizational skills and judgment. Must be willing to take responsibility and commit to the organization's mission, rising beyond regionalism for the broader good of the entire agency. Must be willing to mentor new board members and be supportive of the board and staff. Must be an advocate for the organization, a good listener, and a good public speaker. Extroverts with a sense of humor are encouraged to apply. Must maintain excellent, open relationships with the CEO and key community stakeholders, including the appointive governmental officials and bodies that fill board vacancies.

Focusing on the Agency's Mission

The board chair keeps the board focused on its mission, maintaining the overall view of the agency's work in relation to the region's needs and direction. While the CEO shares this charge, it is the chair's main orientation to look to the future.

The Important CEO–Board Chair Relationship

The relationship with the CEO is important for all board members, and it is the chair who leads the communications. The chair's main objective is a productive, professional working relationship that is a mutually supportive, personal growth experience. One CEO said that he and the board chair were always easily accessible to each other and had developed a strong, personal friendship that strengthened their professional relationship. Many pairs meet regularly in more informal settings, such as breakfasts or working lunches so they can address the agency's challenges. The CEO's performance review is led by the chair.

Consider the chair as the program director, with the program being the partnership with the CEO. He or she goes the extra mile to build and maintain the partnership. The chair may expect the CEO's help in achieving the chair's leadership objectives, working together to create a plan to further the chair's initiatives. The chair will naturally consult with the CEO on the best way to communicate with staff.

Working with Board Members

The chair is the chief consensus builder and communicator. He or she should help to make the board's work easier and more enjoyable.

- The chair leads the executive committee, if there is one, normally composed of the committee chairs and elected officers.
- The chair should use the latest technology for communication, such as email and Internet access, and encourage other board members to do the same.

- The chair helps to orient and educate the board members. He or she describes the history of the agency, recommended lines of communication with the CEO and staff, who is in charge of which area; and the expertise of each of the board members.
- The chair sets a high priority on board capacity building and is an active agent in helping the board become a more effective governing body. He or she promotes professional development experiences, such as attendance at educational and industry seminars.
- The chair helps to educate the board with institutional memory and on complex issues.
- He or she appoints committee and task force chairs and attends at least one of their meetings every six months. Suggesting changes to the committee structure and ensuring that each committee has a charter describing the committee's responsibility is the chair's job.
- The chair publicly recognizes the achievements of the board members and privately addresses improvements that are suggested.
- The chair makes it clear that the contributions or reticence of board members are noticed. The chair cultivates a sense of accountability and ownership among the members.
- The chair leads in setting board performance targets and monitoring board's performance through, perhaps, a self assessment process conducted every two to three years.

Facilitating Board Meetings

Together the CEO and board chair develop the meeting agendas, emphasizing the important issues. The chair conducts the board meetings' starting and ending on time. The board will need full briefings and complete materials from the CEO and senior staff; the chair should request these as needed. The chair should insist that board materials are user-friendly, clear, and concise, and that decision or action items are identified.

The standard advice is to buy a copy of *Robert's Rules of Order* so that meetings are properly conducted and decisions are made with open discussion.

At meetings, the chair's responsibilities include (1) being an effective group facilitator or team builder, ensuring constructive actions and productivity, and (2) acting at times as a conflict mediator. The leader must remain emotionally level in the midst of active, passionate discussion or testimony. He or she must help to control dominating members and bring out those who are heard less often. The responsibilities include treating all contributors equally and allowing everyone to participate freely.

External Relationships

Relationships with many external groups and individuals become more important as a board member ascends to the chairmanship. The chair may request that the CEO schedule him or her to speak in prominent community forums perhaps three or four times a year and involve him or her in key media interviews. The CEO and staff would provide a complete briefing, a PowerPoint® presentation, and rehearsal time.

Please see references for this chapter: 6, 16, 20, 48