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Thoughts about board chairs

Here's how Arthur Meyers, Russell Library (public library of Middletown, CT) describes his board chair: "She brings great empathy and expertise as a person and as a business adviser and coach. She is clear, sensible, patient, direct, organized, good listener, involved in community, able to laugh easily."

Wow. How great is that!

Your board chair just might be so great that you want to clone her for the future. Or at least use her as an example and model for what you constantly and consistently seek.

Your board chair could be just sorta okay kinda. In my experience, most board chairs are sorta okay kinda.

And, yes, there are just plain bad board chairs. Just like there are just plain bad board members.

The goal is to pick the right board chair in the first place. Firing a board chair is hard – harder than firing a lousy board member. (But sometimes firing is necessary. If that's the case, do it. Launch the process. See my book *Firing Lousy Board Members – and Helping the Others Succeed*, from Charity Channel Press.)

Selecting officers requires the same level of work as selecting board members. This is serious business! You need a job description for the board chair. You must outline desirable behaviors and skills. (And have a chat about what you do not want in a board chair, too!)

The Governance Committee needs honest conversation, facilitated by the committee chair and the CEO. The Governance Committee must be insightful and courageous...because that's the group that facilitates board health, and the screening and recruitment of board members and officers.

You need board conversation about the job of the board chair, the expected behaviors and necessary skills. And, of course, the board itself must demand this level of focus and care from its Governance Committee.

And always remember, the CEO plays an important role as an enabler of committee and board conversations. (See my handout about enabling. Read all the details in *Strategic Fund Development, 3rd edition*.)

So what's the job of the board chair?

First, the board chair serves as a facilitator. She chairs board meetings and manages the conversations. She summarizes what she is hearing in order to help the conversation go

forward. She ensures equal voice. She facilitates the decision-making process through motions and voting.

The board chair helps people distinguish between personal opinion (which is often irrelevant) and professional expertise. He helps board members – and the board as group – understand and perform accordingly.

The board chair partners with the CEO to ensure that the board and its committees do not venture into management.

Together, the board chair and CEO facilitate the proper relationship between the board and its committees. (And the CEO makes sure that his/her staff who work with board committees understand the distinctions between governance and management – and effectively enable board members and committees.)

Together, the board chair and CEO develop board meeting agendas.

Together, the board chair and CEO identify committee chairs and assign each board member to the appropriate committee.

What are the skills and behaviors of the best board chairs?

It's a bit like defining leadership, isn't it? I believe in collaboration and empowerment. I expect listening and facilitating and guiding. I don't expect bossing and directing. Remember how Art described his board chair: Good listener. Sensible. Patient. Direct. A good coach. Organized. Sense of humor. I'll be Art's board chair is self-aware and confident but not arrogant.

How is the board chair different than any other board member?

Mostly there is no difference.

The board chair has no more authority than any other board member. The board chair subscribes to the same limitations of any other board member. (Check out John Carver's work about limitation policies.)

The board chair does not recruit board members. As a member of the board, the board chair helps identify candidates and the Governance Committee does the rest of the work.

The board chair does not fire board members. When it comes to poor performance by board members, the board chair may participate in conversations with the Governance Committee. The board chair is certainly aware of the problem. But it's the Governance Committee that handles the process, moves through the various steps of performance feedback, enhancing attrition, or firing. See my book *Firing Lousy Board Members*, for release by Charity Channel Press in October.

Who has the power?

The board has the power. Not the board chair. Not the CEO. Not any other individual. Governance is a group process. The group decides.

If your board members are so weak and ineffectual that they can't pick the right board chair and demand appropriate behavior from the board chair... then the responsibility and accountability belongs with the board.

Remember, the board is important. Governance is important. The board chair can be helpful, harmful, or just really mediocre. Wouldn't you prefer helpful? Wouldn't you appreciate great? Get to work now. Create a shared understanding of great, okay kinda, and just plain bad. Then work together to get the best.

And here are more ideas about the board chair....

A member of cohort 22, Dean, and I drafted this.

The primary role of the board chair is to facilitate the governance process. While the board chair has no more power than any other board, he or she – along with the CEO – is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the integrity of the governance process is maintained in all board proceedings.

But upon further reflection: Do I really think the board chair is primarily responsible for good governance? Actually, I think it is the board's role to ensure good governance. And the board chair helps facilitate that process.

Now how about these various functional areas, e.g., interpersonal, operational, and community.

1. Interpersonal functions of the board chair

- a. Empowers all board members and board committees.
- b. Empowers the administration to work enthusiastically in support of mission. (Hmmm... Really? Or is that mostly the CEO's role?)
- c. Ensures board members and the board (as a group) feels a deep commitment to mission and community. (Hmmm... Commitment is really an individual thing. Internal motivation. The board chair and CEO can certainly help. But ultimately, the individual is responsible for his or her own commitment and performance.)
- d. Ensures that board members feel valued and respected. (The board chair can help. But each person has to value and respect others.)

2. Operational functions

- a. Facilitates effective meetings.
- b. With the CEO, creates the board meeting agenda.
- c. With the CEO, appoints committee chairs and appoints board members to various committees.
- d. Serves ex-officio on all committees but is not required (nor expected!) to attend all meetings.

3. Community

- a. Supports and advocates for the organization and its leadership team.
- b. Demonstrates leadership in fundraising

And here are some other miscellaneous thoughts: The board chair has voice but no more authority than any other board member. The board chair is a leader by virtue of her/his elected position. More importantly, s/he demonstrates leadership by virtue of character.

Has your board talked about the role and skills and behaviors desired in the board chair? Does your governance committee talk about all this – in order to find nominate the best board chair possible?

How might life change in your organization – and within the board – if you all talked about the role of the board chair – and the expectations?