



Nonprofit Board and CEO Are Really In Strategic Partnership

Although theory and law assert that the CEO works for the Board, the working relationship and mutual support between the Board and CEO is critical to the success of a nonprofit. There might be an impression that the traditional structure of Boards, with its conventional job descriptions and committees, is somehow a rigid, top-down hierarchy, but this often is not the case. In many nonprofits, it is actually the CEO who facilitates and guides the Board members to do their jobs. Many nonprofits have the CEO and other staff members on certain committees. The CEO has strong input to the deliberations and decisions of Board members. Research suggests that a successful working relationship – a “strategic partnership” – between the Board members and CEO is one of the most important criteria for a high-performing nonprofit organization.

Descriptions of the traditional policy Board often portray the Board members as the “bosses” of CEOs, handing down directives and then “policing” the CEOs to ensure that those directives are followed. CEOs with that perspective often are confounded to understand why they must report to a group of people (Board members), many of whom do not seem to understand much, if anything at all, about the nonprofit and its programs. Consequently, these CEOs struggle to accept the credibility and directions from Board members. New or struggling CEOs can even resent and disrespect Board members to the extent that the CEOs ignore the members altogether.

Many experts assert that one of the reasons that a Board might struggle to be effective is because the CEO really does not want an effective Board and, therefore, does not help members to realize their roles and does not provide needed information to the Board members. Seasoned CEOs have learned that their jobs can be enhanced considerably with the additional guidance and resources from a highly effective Board of Directors – but the CEOs realize they must help the Board members to be that effective. CEOs can support the development of a Board by:

- **Helping Board members to understand their roles as members of a governing Board.**
The CEO often has more interest and resources to fully understand the role of a nonprofit Board and, therefore, can be extremely helpful to Board members’ learning their roles. The CEO can work with the Board Chair or Chair of a Board Development Committee to design and conduct the first several Board trainings.
- **Suggesting people to recruit as Board members.**
As much as possible, these people should be independent Board members – people who have no other strong, vested interest in the nonprofit, for example, people who are not staff members, or who are not very close and personal friends of the CEO.
- **Training Board members about the nonprofit and its programs.**
Frequently, members can serve on a Board for years and still not really know what programs are offered by the nonprofit. CEOs can significantly increase the effectiveness of Board members, and their contributions to the nonprofit, by orienting members about the nonprofit, including its history, programs, collaborators and successes.

- **Playing a strong role in strategic planning discussions and decisions.**
Boards that view members as attending primarily to top-level policy will sometimes make the mistake of determining mission, vision, values and top-level goals without the input from the CEO and senior staff members. That is a mistake. The most useful strategic planning sessions often involve information, discussions and suggestions from staff members.
- **Participating in Board committees.**
The CEO can provide great value to committees, especially Fundraising, Finance, Personnel (except when the Board is evaluating the CEO and determining his/her compensation), Programs and Marketing. A trend is for other staff members to be on some of the Board committees, as well.
- **Provide useful information to Board members in time for their review before meetings.**
Some CEOs have learned that one of the best ways to incapacitate a Board is by giving them new materials during a Board meeting, so that members are quickly overwhelmed and confused. As a result, members end up listening and agreeing with whatever the CEO suggests. Seasoned CEOs share materials well before Board meetings.



An excellent resource that researched and explained the value of this partnership is *Executive Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations: New Strategies for Shaping Executive-Board Dynamics* by R.D. Heimovics and R.D. Herman (Jossey-Bass, 1991).
