

The Unique Job of the Board Chair

Big Picture Focus

- Focus on the future – you, above all people, need to be aware of where the organization is going and that the pieces are aligned to get it there
- Listen for (unspoken) concerns that might become important and address them in a timely and appropriate manner
- Think about your legacy – what will you have left in place for the organization and your successor?

Partnership with Executive Director

- Be available – you are the best candidate to be the Executive Director’s confidant, confessor and thought partner in steering the organization
- Help the Executive Director focus on the big picture – so often the small stuff threatens to overwhelm their focus
- Nurture a relationship in which the Executive Director can air doubts and doesn’t have to be the expert (it’s better for little nagging concerns to see the light of day before they become big nagging concerns)
- Support and encourage the Executive Director – no-one else will think to praise their work but you
- Manage the board as the Executive Director manages the organization – don’t leave both responsibilities on the shoulders of the Executive Director

Board Management

- Steer the board’s performance (as a whole) – is it taking on the issues that will allow the organization to thrive?
- As chair you lead and coordinate: not so much doing all the work as guiding the board team to high levels of performance
- Manage board members individually – they are your team and you need to both keep them happy and get the most out of them
- Keep board members motivated (including reminding everyone that furthering the mission is the reason the board is needed to do its job)
- Your first thought upon hearing a new need should not be “I’ll do it” – rather it should be “Who can we get to do this?”
- Recruit a strategist to chair your Nominating Committee to serve as your partner in assessing the board’s composition and performance
- Create a leadership farm team system on the board – make sure that new leaders are being groomed through experience
- Identify (and train) the people who could be following you in board leadership, right from the start
- Recruit committee leaders – ad hoc and standing – by asking the right people to step up
- Make sure committee leaders are doing their job and that they drive the work of their particular area forward
- Get the right teammates on the board and find them if they’re not there now
- Mix behind-the-scenes conversations with full-board and committee-level discussion, especially when introducing organizational change
- Work toward a board that is firing on all cylinders

Role Model

- Be available to serve as the board’s representative whenever and wherever needed (or find someone to sub for you)
- Serve as a role model for board behavior, including:
 - Giving and getting
 - Reading/paying attention
 - Strategic thinking
 - Respecting fellow board members’ commitments of time and energy
 - Acting as an enthusiastic and ubiquitous ambassador
 - Setting a tone of responsibility/accountability
 - Serving as the cheerleader-in-chief