Elements of a Great Executive Director – Board Chair Relationship

At the March 2013 meeting of board chairs and executive directors, there was consensus that the board chair/ED relationship is a proxy for health of the organization. To that end, they developed the following criteria for an outstanding ED – Chair relationship, with the implicit understanding that both were functioning well in their individual roles with the organization.

Clear Roles

- Write down specific responsibilities, clear expectations and boundaries for each role.
- Take into consideration the skills and interests of both parties when assigning responsibilities.
- Reach an understanding on who plays what role in public (e.g. quotes to publications, speaking engagements, etc.).
- Utilize RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consult, Inform) from Janet Levinger.
- Because of a (perhaps long) prior relationship history, it may be beneficial to have another board member playing HR role for Executive Director.
- When necessary, the team should decide how to conduct a partner intervention, and what each one’s role will be.

A Constructive, Supportive Team

- ED should be aware that the board chair role can appear daunting, and that the Chair’s affinity may be with directly supporting nonprofits.
- Both parties take responsibility to advocate for their own needs, and to seek to understand the other’s.
- Ideally, the chair/ED team will balance each other in vision vs. execution, aspiration vs. realism, etc.
- Meetings between the ED and chair will be structured in such a way that both find it to be energizing.
- Each will strive to always show the other respect in order to build mutual trust.
- Both are committed to being frank and honest in their interactions.
- The Chair will be an advocate for the ED’s professional development.
- At the beginning of the working relationship, both members commit to understanding one another’s working styles and creating a system of working together to accommodate difference.
Effective Communication

- Both parties agree to be clear, open, and candid in their communications.
- Have frequent conversations, e.g., weekly basis.
- Both parties value this relationship enough to maintain a regular schedule of calls.
- While in person and phone communications are necessary for expediency and building relationships, both parties will commit to follow up in writing with any tasks or commitments made during meetings.

Aligned on Strategy, Vision, Priorities

- The board chair and ED are the key presenters of the vision, and should articulate the same aspirational goals for the organization.
- As the ED is often primarily responsible for tactics, the chair will provide a higher level “Forest/trees” view.
- This team is equally responsible for the conception, communication and execution of the organization’s strategic plan.
- On a regular basis or as opportunities arise, the team will work together to prioritize initiatives and activities and allocate resources.
- Both parties agree to hold themselves and the other accountable to focus on the right things.
- The ED and chair will develop the same understanding as to what “stage” the organization is in.
- The team members will cultivate in themselves and encourage in the other an appropriate and agreed-upon level of risk tolerance.

Set the Example for the Board and Broader Partnership

- It’s explicitly acknowledged that the Board Chair/ED relationship is a proxy for health of the organization.
  - The team strives to bring energy to the Board and Partnership through such things as a “Mission moment”, e.g., at beginning of each board and/or Partner meeting.
- The team works together to manage a culture of openness, support, celebration and continuous improvement.
- The Board Chair is a model Partner who follows through on commitments and models the culture.
  - The team speaks with one voice to the partnership.
- The Board Chair acts as a “barometer” as to “How much speed the Partnership can take.”
- This team is accountable to communicate the importance of and create a succession plan.
- This team works together to encourage full board participation.
Best Contributions from a Chair

• **Share the vision**
  o Be committed to the organization’s aspirations
  o Be shoulder-to-shoulder with me to help SVP be successful
  o Be a true partner in manifesting dreams

• **Support me**
  o Be accessible
  o Care for the individual
  o Make me feel appreciated
  o Give me due recognition
  o Have my back

• **Challenge me to grow**
  o Be direct
  o Hold me accountable
  o Help me see “blind spots”
  o Help me learn

Best Contributions from an ED

• **Blend managing and leading**

• **Servant leadership**
  o Lead, but don’t be directive
  o Be humble
  o Lead by example
  o Act as “parent” and “peer”

• **Sensitive to culture**
  o Adapt style to situation
  o Handle chaos with class

• **Knows the community**

• **Optimism regarding possibilities**
  o Be entrepreneurial/risk-taking

• **Willing to challenge status quo**
  o Be assertive