



The Board-Savvy CEO



Is your CEO a board-astute leader? Here's how to tell.

By Doug Eadie

When a nonprofit board chooses its CEO, it's also choosing the captain of its strategic governing team. This all-important team is made up of the board, CEO, and senior executives who work with the board. Your board is obviously the most senior member of the strategic governing team - the ultimate authority, judge, and decision maker. However, the CEO has to wear the team captain hat if you want the strategic governing team to be healthy, cohesive, and productive.

The reason is simple: time. No matter how capable and dedicated board members are, they're usually part-time, unpaid volunteers. They have enough trouble coming up with the time to attend board and committee meetings, much less to attend public functions, speak in appropriate forums, and raise money. Only the CEO has the time (including senior staff's) to plan for,

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manage, and support the strategic governing team.

Behind every high-impact board is a board-savvy CEO, who is able to do the following:

1. Welcome and celebrate strong board leadership and a close board-CEO partnership.

You can spot board-savvy and un-savvy CEOs just by listening to them talk about their boards and the governing process. Let's see if you can tell the difference:

CEO A: You know, I stay out of the board's business – policy

making – and I expect them to stay out of my mine – executive management and administration. I'm always aware of the danger that they'll become micromanagers rather than the governors they're supposed to be, so I make sure I bring them finished staff recommendations and keep them from digging too deeply in the details. You might call me a kind of border patrol officer, always on the alert to keep them from crossing over into my territory.

CEO B: One of my most important CEO jobs is to make sure the board is fully deployed on behalf of my organization. I see myself as the board's partner, sharing the work of governing. Of course, there must be some division of labor in areas such as planning, but, frankly, you can't draw a line with policy-making on one side and management on the other.

I've got to be an active participant in the job of governing, helping board members make effective decisions and making sure they find their work satisfying.

I assume you chose CEO B as the board-savvier of the two. CEOs like CEO B know that partnership is the name of the governing game. They see the board as a precious asset, consisting of the knowledge, perspectives, and connections that board members bring to the board room.

2. Devote a healthy dollop of time to the governing function.

Board-savvy CEOs see governing as a top CEO priority. They spend 20-25% of their time working on governing matters: developing agendas for committee and board meetings; chairing executive-team meetings dedicated to board

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agenda development; ensuring that materials going to the board are high-quality; formally and informally communicating with board members on a regular basis.

3. Help the board build its governing capacity.

Board-savvy CEOs take the trouble to become experts in the rapidly developing field of nonprofit governance, regularly reading periodicals and books on board leadership and attending educational sessions at conferences. They set clear goals for strengthening the board, fashion strategies to accomplish these goals, and rigorously monitor progress in carrying out the strategies. They become chief board developers — clarifying the board's governing role, fine-tuning the board's governing structure, and mapping out processes for involving the board in such critical governing

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functions as strategic planning and performance monitoring.

When serious board development occurs, it's almost always driven by a board-savvy CEO who knows how to do the following:

- Take the lead in getting board members interested in – and committed to – developing the board's governing capacity (by, for example, sharing articles on governance with board members and encouraging board members to attend sessions on governance at national and state conferences).
- Convince the board to participate in board development processes such as governance retreats and task forces.
- Keep up to date in the field of nonprofit governance to help the board make well-informed decisions.
- Ensure that the board development process is successful by providing strong support, both during the process and in implementing the recommendations coming out of it. For example, if a board's governance task force recommends that the board adopt governing targets and monitor its own performance, the board-savvy CEO will ensure that the targets get set and the monitoring process is established.

4. Pay close attention to the psychological and emotional facet of the CEO-board relationship.

Board members tend to be ambitious, hard-driving individuals who can be impatient and at times imperious. They come to the boardroom with high expectations and don't suffer disappointment well. When you add to the mix a changing, challenging world, you can see why the board-CEO bond tends to fray if not carefully nurtured.

Board savvy CEOs employ two simple but effective strategies to

keep their partnership with the board healthy:

- They take advantage of opportunities to provide board members with ego satisfaction. For example, they turn speaking invitations over to board members and involve board members in meetings with key stakeholders, including the media. They make sure board members are publicly recognized for their efforts – say, in the monthly newsletter.

- Board-savvy CEOs are always on the lookout for ways to foster feelings of ownership among board members. One of the most effective strategies is to design early board input into the planning process. This is the polar opposite of the old-fashioned approach of just presenting the board with a finished plan at the tail-end of the process, turning board members into a passive audience. The board-savvy CEO is constantly looking for practical ways to turn board members into passionate owners of their governing work. ■

Resources

Craft, Ralph & Ronald Benson, "How to Assess and Improve Your Board's Performance," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 24, No. 1.

Eadie, Doug, "Boards Can't Go It Alone: Forging the Board-Executive Partnership," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 14, No. 2.

Houle, Cyril, "How Effective Is Your Board? A Rating Scale," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 8, No. 5.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members. Also see Learning Institute programs online: Board Governance (www.snpo.org/li).

This article is adapted from Doug Eadie's newest book, Meeting the Governing Challenge (Governance Edge, 2007). Doug (Doug@DougEadie.com, 800-209-7652) is president & CEO of Doug Eadie & Company (www.DougEadie.com), a firm specializing in building high-impact board-CEO partnerships.