



How to Create a Strong Board-CEO Partnership

This precious bond is a top key to your organization's success.

By Doug Eadie

Building and maintaining a close, productive, and enduring board-CEO partnership in your organization – a true “strategic leadership team,” if you will – is a high-stakes matter that deserves lots of time and attention. The health of this most precious partnership makes the list of top five factors that determine whether your nonprofit will flourish in today’s always changing, challenging world. Of course, all human relationships require conscious, constant management to keep them healthy, but the board-CEO partnership is especially fragile, for two primary reasons.

First, the members of this top-tier team tend to be strong personalities with substantial egos and a propensity toward type-A behavior – not the easiest crew to meld into a cohesive team. Second, the issues that boards and CEOs must grapple with are so complex and high-stakes that they can create a pressure-cooker atmosphere, putting stress on the relationship.

Here are four of the most important things boards and CEOs can do to assure a healthy relationship:

Form a Committee.

Make sure you have a standing committee responsible for maintaining the board-CEO partnership. Your board’s executive committee is the natural choice, because of its membership (the board chair, committee chairs, perhaps other board officers, and the CEO) and its responsibility for board operations generally.

Create a CEO-Board Chair Collaboration.

Savvy CEOs and board chairs always pay close attention to their relationship. If the relationship is tense or dysfunctional, board members will question the CEO’s interpersonal skills. The ability to forge a strong alliance with the board chair is widely considered an indicator of

a CEO’s diplomatic abilities. A wise CEO will spend time assuring frequent, candid communication with the board chair.

Be Sure the Board Evaluates CEO Performance Regularly.

Regular, formal board evaluation of CEO performance is the most powerful tool for keeping the board-CEO partnership healthy. Ironically, however, the process is often poorly handled. Be certain that your evaluation process focuses on key areas of CEO performance. Also make sure that the process involves board members and the CEO in meaningful dialogue.

Let the Board Govern.

If the CEO is more worried about defending executive prerogatives from meddling board members than about helping the board realize its potential as a governing body, then board capacity building will become a frustrating battleground rather than a matter of creative board-CEO collaboration. If board members spend the bulk of their time merely thumbing through reams of finished staff work, they’re not governing at a high level.

Effective CEO support is aimed at helping a board realize its full potential as a governing body, not only doing high-impact governing work, but also finding deep satisfaction in — and feeling strong ownership of — their work. Both staff and board members need a thorough grounding in the mechanics of the governing process, starting with a clear definition of what “governing” means and moving on to the nuts and bolts involved in governing work, such as the board’s role in strategic planning, budget preparation, and performance monitoring. As part of this educational process, the CEO can assemble a comprehensive library of governance materials, making sure that board and staff members are exposed to pertinent publications in the field

and carving out meeting time to discuss developments in this rapidly changing field. ■

Your Governance Library

These *Nonprofit World* resources (www.snpo.org/members) will form a basis for your library of governance materials and help you keep the board-CEO partnership strong:

- **Boards Can’t Go It Alone: Forging a Partnership with the Executive Director** (Vol. 14, No. 2)
- **CEO Evaluation: The Board’s Second Most Crucial Duty** (Vol. 8, No. 3)
- **How Effective Is Your Board? A Rating Scale** (Vol. 8, No. 5)
- **Seven Creative Ways to Energize Your Board** (Vol. 16, No. 3)
- **How to Prepare Board Members to Govern Effectively** (Vol. 25, No. 6)
- **Board and Staff Consensus: A Powerful Fundraising Tool** (Vol. 15, No. 1)
- **Building a Strong Board-Exec Relationship** (Vol. 21, No. 4)
- **Evaluating the Top Administrator: A New Approach** (Vol. 15, No. 4)
- **How to Develop a High-Impact Board** (Vol. 24, No. 4)
- **Board Leadership & Governance** category in *Nonprofit World CD-ROM*
- **Board Governance Learning Institute program online at www.snpo.org/li.**

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