

What Are the Two Linchpins of a Successful Board-CEO Partnership?

Do you provide these two essentials to your board members?

By Doug Eadie

Over the years, I've interviewed hundreds of board members while preparing for board retreats and strategic planning sessions. One of the questions I always ask is, "Tell me about your experience as a board member. What's it like being part of this board?"

Here's what I heard when I talked to board members of a health clinic recently: "I feel like I'm making a tremendous difference in the community, and I'm learning a lot to boot." "I can't tell you how much it means to me that we're doing a top-notch job of meeting a really pressing need." "Working on this board is challenging, but worth the time and effort." "Committee and board meetings are tremendously productive, and I feel like my time is well-spent."

When I get answers like that, I can be pretty sure there's a CEO with a lot of board savvy. The board members of this clinic weren't only satisfied with their governing experience, they also felt like owners of their governing work. Those are the two linchpins of a solid board-CEO partnership: board member satisfaction and feelings of ownership.

Satisfaction comes — above all else — from board members being actively engaged in doing important governing work that capitalizes on their resources — their knowledge, expertise, and connections with key stakeholders. Board member satisfaction also comes from governing work that is interesting, ego-satisfying, and even now and then fun.

Closely related to satisfaction is ownership, one of the most powerful forces at work in leadership. Ownership is the preeminent source of board member loyalty and commitment.

Board members' feelings of ownership result from being involved early enough in a process to shape decisions in meaningful ways. For

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example, Pam Shea's school board in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, was involved intensively — from the get-go — in the planning process that resulted in the Teton County School District's updated strategic plan. So by the time Pam's board members formally adopted the plan, this major governing product truly belonged to them.

If Pam hadn't been so board-savvy, she might have taken a more traditional and straightforward approach: merely having staff and/or a consultant crank out a strategic planning document, and sending the finished plan to the board to thumb through and comment on. The board might have been an appreciative audience for the plan, admiring its logic and relevance, but they wouldn't have been committed owners who could be counted on to support the plan over the long haul.

I wish I could report that the majority of board members I've encountered over the years have been satisfied owners of their governing work, but, sad to say, the overwhelming majority, based on my interviews, have felt unfulfilled, underutilized, disengaged, dissatisfied, frustrated, and disappointed. For example, when I interviewed the board members of a professional association a few months ago, responses to my question about the governing experience were typical of what I hear much of the time: "We spend all our time just listening to staff reports in board meetings — boring!" "I'm really not sure what my role is, and I definitely don't feel like I'm making much of a difference." "We looked at the finished line-item budget a month before we had to vote on it, so any changes we could make at that point were pretty trivial — really a waste of our time." "I can't say we're making any really strategic decisions, or dealing with any high-stakes issues."

Early in my consulting career, the need for a board-savvy CEO was vividly brought home to me. I was working with one of the smartest



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CEOs I've ever met. He — let's call him "Howard" — was in many ways an executive virtuoso, who'd mastered his leadership craft — with one notable exception that proved deadly. Early one morning, walking into Howard's office to discuss the upcoming board meeting, I found him ashen-faced.

"For heaven's sake, Howard," I said, "what's happened?"

"Here," he replied, handing me a piece of paper, "read this and tell me what you think." It turned out to be the board's most recent evaluation of Howard's performance. As I worked my way down the page, I couldn't figure out what the problem was; Howard was scoring high on every item that had been ranked: strategic planning, financial management, public relations, and the like. But when I got to the bottom, I found that the board had decided he should ply his CEO trade elsewhere. In effect, what they said was, "You're great at what you do, but you've left us out of the action. We feel uninvolved, uncreative, and condescended to. We've had it, and you're out."

It takes lots of good thinking, planning, and nuts and bolts process design to generate the kind of board member involvement that fosters satisfaction and ownership. Only a board-savvy CEO has the knowledge and time to get the job done.

For example, the boards of the International and American Associations for Dental Research couldn't — on their own — have carried out the process that made them strong owners of a brand-new board structure. Not because they weren't smart enough, or dedicated enough, but because only their board-savvy CEO, Christopher Fox, had the time and expertise to figure out the steps involved. These steps (such as holding a daylong retreat at the very onset of the restructuring process) assured that the process was implemented fully and on time — and that board members were satisfied owners of their governing work. 



This article is excerpted from Doug Eadie's 20th book, *The Board-Savvy CEO: Building a High-Impact Partnership With Your Board* (published by *Governance Edge*). To contact Doug: Doug@DougEadie.com.

“I have been faithfully reading *NONPROFIT WORLD* for 20 years.”

Terrie Temkin, Ph.D.
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Dr. Terrie Temkin is a founding principal of CoreStrategies for Nonprofits, Inc., an international consulting firm that builds organizational infrastructure. She is an award-winning speaker and an engaging group facilitator, who brings close to 40 years of nonprofit management and adult-education experience to her work.

Considered by her colleagues as a thought leader in the area of governance, Terrie was one of the first to talk about strategic thinking as a governance function. She is a co-author of *Community Engagement Governance*,™ a new framework for governance that is gaining wide acceptance, and editor

of *You and Your Nonprofit Board: New Thinking from the Field's Top Practitioners, Researchers and Provocateurs* (CharityChannel Press, 2013). A prolific writer, her work can be found throughout the world in books, journals, blogs and her popular monthly column, "On Nonprofits." She is an adjunct faculty member at Florida Atlantic University, teaching a graduate course in nonprofit governance.

Terrie says: I have been faithfully reading *NONPROFIT WORLD* for 20 years. Not only does it keep me current, as a consultant and adjunct professor in nonprofit governance at a local university, I find it a treasure trove of short, easily digestible articles to share when I want to make a point.

I typically look first to the articles. I appreciate that the contributing authors are some of the biggest names in the field. Therefore, when I read an article, I have confidence that the information is accurate and timely.

However, I also love the departments. Personal favorites are "Five Things to Do Next Monday," "Ask the Experts," "Legal Counsel," and, of course — as a governance consultant — "The Board Room."

Each of these gives me things to think about. For instance, in "Five Things to Do Next Monday," I usually find at least one new technique for moving my practice forward or one task that I've been promising myself I'd do that I haven't. This is often the push I need!

In "Legal Counsel" I find valuable information outside my own area of knowledge that makes me look smarter to my clients. And I always enjoy hearing how others approach a problem, situation, or new reality in "Ask the Experts" or "The Board Room."

But the feature I value perhaps more than any other is the resource box that follows nearly every article. These resource boxes point me to previous articles that are readily available in the Nonprofit World Library. I can easily dig deeper into subjects of particular interest.

Thanks, *NONPROFIT WORLD*, and keep up the good work!