



Building an Alliance with Your Board Chair

Nothing is more critical to your success as a chief executive than your partnership with your board chair.

By Doug Eadie

As a CEO, one of your top priorities should be to help your board chair become a strong governing partner, a reliable ally, and when needed, an ardent change champion. You'll reap powerful dividends by developing a rock-solid relationship with your chair. These four strategies will help you do so:

1. Get to Know Your Board Chair

Focus in depth on the following crucial areas:

Become versed on the resources the chair brings to the leadership role, including skills, expertise, external connections, and reputation. This is important knowledge to have because it's counterproductive to call on chairs for things they're not capable of providing. But with this knowledge, you can help your chair offer leadership beyond merely chairing board meetings. For example, one board chair was a virtuoso at behind-the-scenes negotiation but ineffectual as a public speaker. His board-savvy CEO knew enough to call on him in negotiating privately with stakeholders but avoid having him represent the nonprofit as a speaker in key forums.

Understand the board chair's style of communicating.

One CEO called on my help because of a frustrating situation: He kept sending his board chair papers about issues coming up at the next board meeting only to receive no response at all. Charged with finding out what was going on, I scheduled lunch with the chair, who told me how puzzled he was that the CEO was sending him long issue papers. He explained that anyone who took the trouble to get to know him would understand that he infinitely preferred a face-to-face sit-down over wading through a briefing paper. Once he understood the problem, the CEO was happy to change his own style to match that of his chair. Now he meets for lunch once a week with his chair to go over major issues deserving the chair's attention.

Learn the board chair's aspirations and special interests.

Paying attention to your chair's professional and personal goals will uncover many opportunities for you to develop a fruitful alliance. For example, the board chair of a children's services nonprofit wanted to become more comfortable at public speaking. Knowing this, the CEO forged a positive relationship with her by providing opportunities for her to speak in public.

2. Help the Chair Succeed in the Role of Governing

Go out of your way to ensure that the chair succeeds in the formal governing role. For example, one CEO spends at least an hour on the phone with his board chair before every board meeting, going over the agenda point by point, and answering any questions the chair might have, thereby making sure the chair is well prepared to lead discussion.


3. Provide a Satisfying Experience Beyond Governing

Board-savvy CEOs actively help their chairs have richer, more satisfying experiences beyond the formal leadership role. The CEO of one nonprofit, for instance, reaches out to the board chair in the weeks before the organization's annual retreat. She makes sure that the chair plays a leading role in developing the agenda, she prepares opening remarks for the chair to deliver at the retreat, and she ensures that her chair is assigned to the breakout groups in which he is most interested. In the external affairs arena, the board-savvy superintendent of an urban school district provides meticulous support for his board chair's speaking engagements on behalf of the district, helping her rehearse and making sure she is armed with talking points and visual aids.

When you deepen your partnership with your board chair in ways such as these, you're saying, through concrete action, "I really do care about the quality of your experience, and I'll do what I can to make it more interesting and rewarding." Such attentiveness is a powerful relationship builder.

4. Satisfy Your Board Chair's Ego

Board chairs are typically blessed with robust egos; that's one of the reasons they've become their board's leader. A simple, inexpensive way to strengthen your partnership is to capitalize on opportunities to provide the chair with ego satisfaction. We've already discussed the big ways, such as making sure the chair succeeds in carrying out the formal governing role – but there are myriad smaller, less elaborate ways you can attend to your chair's ego needs. For example:

- **Invite the board chair to sit in** on a meeting with the local paper's editorial board or participate in a radio talk show.
- **Recognize the chair's service** in one of your nonprofit's publications.
- **Make sure the chair keynotes** the annual staff convocation. 

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Hit the Ground Running with Your New Board

Doug Eadie's webinar for the Society of Nonprofits builds on the pillars of a solid CEO-board partnership. Drawing on his 25 years of work with over 500 CEOs and their boards and on his book *The Board-Savvy CEO*, "Hit the Ground Running with Your New Board" provides CEO-aspirants and new CEOs with detailed, practical guidance in creating rock-solid partnerships with their new boards. For more information, visit snpo.org/webinars.



Take the Lead

For more details on engaging and partnering with board members, check out these articles at NonprofitWorld.org:

Three Vital Questions for Your Board (Vol. 36, No. 1)

How to Talk to Your Board (Vol. 23, No. 1)

Success through Engaged High-Level Board Members (Vol. 34, No. 1)

Using Board Portals to Keep Directors Connected (Vol. 29, No. 3)

Turn Your Board Members into Strong Owners (Vol. 28, No. 2)

How to Create a Strong Board-CEO Partnership (Vol. 27, No. 1)

Five Golden Rules for Board-Exec Retreats (Vol. 26, No. 1)

35 Questions that Will Transform Your Board (Vol. 24, No. 3)

What Nonprofit CEOs Really Think of Their Boards (Vol. 33, No. 2)