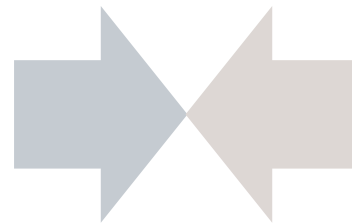


Are Your Board & Staff Roles Aligned for Best Results?

If either strays from its role, chaos can result.



By Kenneth Schuetz

The monthly board meeting is approaching. The board chair and executive director are stressed as they prepare for the meeting. Once again, the chair is trying to come up with an agenda that makes sense. The executive director is preparing details of the organization's work that need to be discussed and maybe even defended at the meeting. Neither of them is ever sure they're doing the right thing in leading the board and staff, and both wish there were clearer leadership guidelines for them to follow.

Are they doing the right things? Is this confusion and lack of clarity just part of the job that they accepted?

This leadership confusion is common for many organizations. Boards are tremendously important structures but are often challenging for those who serve on them and those who operate under their authority.

Boards are so important that nonprofits and public for-profits are mandated to have them, and other organizations often

“The board defines the strategic “what.””

choose to institute them. Considering their importance, why does this leadership confusion continue to exist?

It exists because we place very capable, talented, and energetic people in positions without providing a foundational structure that supports the execution of their roles. This leads to well-meaning board members becoming overly involved in day-to-day operations, and well-meaning executive directors and staff members defining and redefining the boundaries of what the organization should be doing. This confusion leads organizations to fall short of their full potential because a great deal of the board's and staff's time is spent dealing with the “overhead” of managing this relationship.

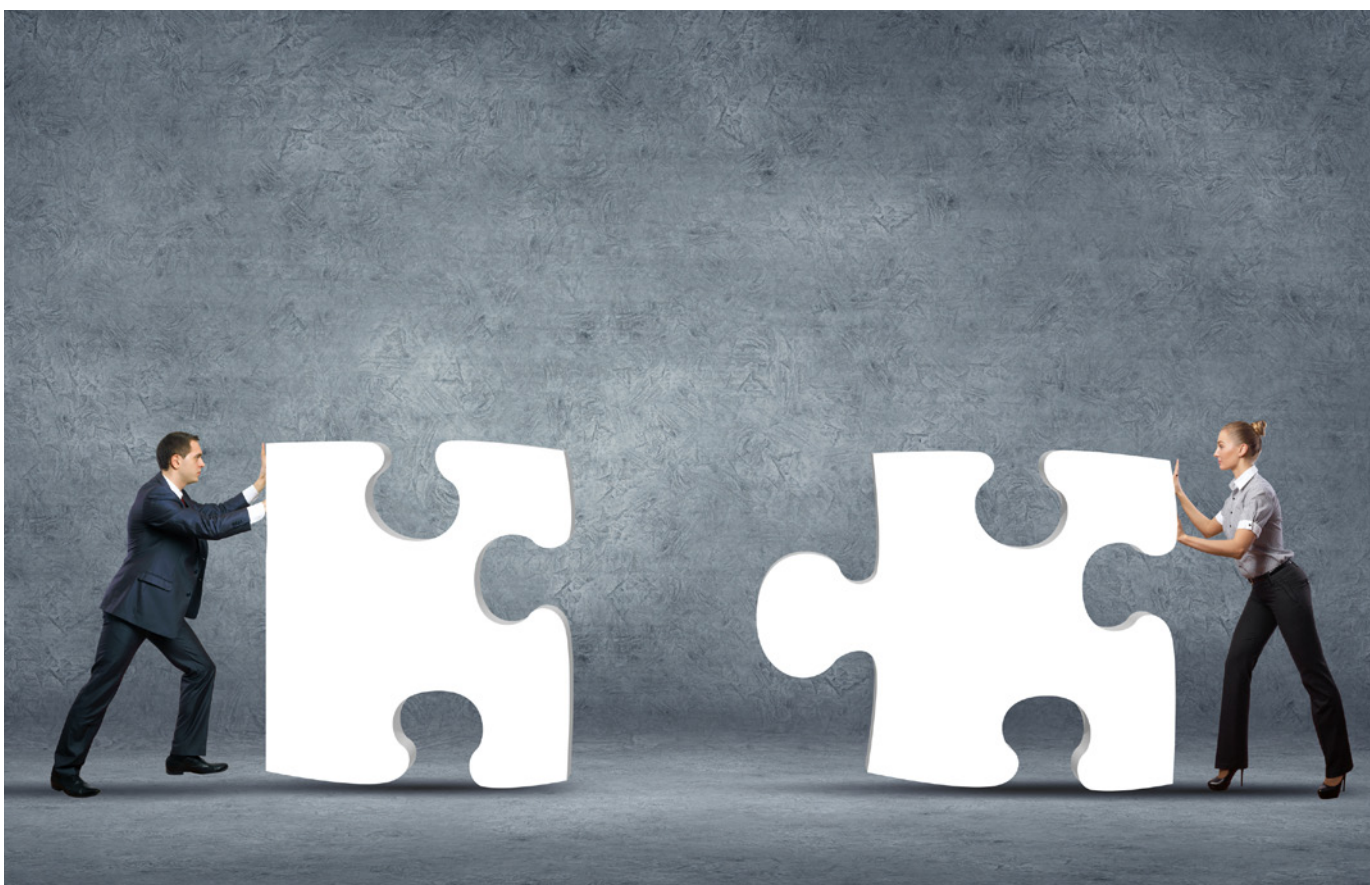


TABLE 1: DIFFERING ROLES FOR BOARD & STAFF

Area	Board Role	Staff Role
Leadership	Sets outward-focused direction. Decides what is to be accomplished, who is to be served, and ideals to be maintained.	Sets inward-focused 3-5 year operational plans and the budgets that support those plans.
Risk Management	Establishes boundaries and monitors the organization for compliance with those boundaries.	Identifies, mitigates, and manages risk through policies, procedures, and appropriate levels of insurance.
Planning	Defines the strategic “what” that the organization should be accomplishing.	Defines the tactical “how” in support of the work defined by the board.
Resource Development	Networks with professional and personal contacts, keeping the organization’s needs in mind.	Establishes resource-development goals and plans for achieving those goals.
Policy Development	Oversees the creation of by-laws and creates governing policies by which the board monitors the organization.	Creates operating policies and procedures that direct staff in how to accomplish their work.

The answer to this dilemma is educating everyone about their roles. Then board and staff must commit to working within the bounds of those roles.

Role of the Board

The role of the board of directors is to direct, protect, and enable the organization. Let’s look at those three aspects of the role in more detail:

1. The board directs the organization by establishing and maintaining the strategic “what” of the organization. Board members define the target that represents organizational success. This may sound self-evident, but experience shows that it’s one of the hardest points to clarify for board members as they create their governing documents.

2. The board protects the organization by creating boundaries to ensure the organization remains safe and successful. The boundaries are expressed as policies that start out broadly and can be narrowed with more detail to any level that the board chooses.

The board monitors the boundaries, and these boundary reviews provide some of the structure for board meetings throughout the year.

Common boundary statements relate to treatment of clients, treatment of staff and volunteers, financial planning and management, risk management, compensation, and benefits.

Boards typically monitor these policies once a year. With 10 to 20 policies, the board reviews at least one policy per month.

3. The board enables the work of the organization through advocacy and resource development. Board members advocate for the organization through their own networks of professional, civic, and personal contacts. Every conversation they have is an opportunity to advocate for the needs and mission of the organization. Board members represent the organization to every person with whom they interact.

The organization is made visible to everyone that the board members know. Obviously, this means that board members must clearly understand the work of the organization.

Each relationship is also a chance to recruit new supporters. This doesn’t mean that every conversation needs to end with an “ask.” But it does mean that board members should always be listening for possible connections between the organization’s needs and the talents and resources of people they know. There will be times that an “ask” is fitting, and it may or may not be the board member’s role to make the request. In some cases, it may make sense for the board member to refer the potential donor to the executive director or someone on the staff to make the request.

As soon as board members veer from their directing, protecting, and enabling role, they risk disabling or at least complicating the staff’s efforts. Board members are often tempted to wander into leading, managing, and accomplishing roles. However, they’ll help the staff by staying out of those areas.

“The executive director and staff define the “how.””

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Executive Director & Staff Roles

The executive director's role is to lead, manage, and accomplish the organization's work. If the board defines the strategic "what" of the organization, the executive director and staff define the tactical "how" to carry out the strategic "what." This doesn't mean that executive directors are relegated to the mundane. Rather, they're empowered to perform the organization's work in any way they see fit within the boundaries established by the board.

Leadership and management are often confused. But there's a big difference:

Leadership is future-focused. It's about how the organization must change to accomplish the organization's work, in the context of shifting challenges and opportunities.

Management is focused on the present. It's about how to structure the organization's work so that it's completed on time, on budget, and with excellence.

“Each will be sorely missed if not done properly.”

Board & Staff Make Great Partners

The roles of board and staff don't conflict but, rather, complement each other. For more details on how both roles can work smoothly together, see articles such as these at NonprofitWorld.org:

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

Dealing with Change in a VUCA World (Vol. 37, No. 4)

From Bored to Blazing: Fire Up Your Board (Vol. 37, No. 3)

How Your Board Members Can Raise Funds without Asking for a Dime (Vol. 19, No. 6)

Risks Get Riskier for Nonprofits: ERM Can Help (Vol. 38, No. 1)

The Seven Tenets of Board Engagement (Vol. 40, No. 1)

Are You Equipped to Lead in a World of Great Complexity? (Vol. 37, No. 1)

Board and Staff Consensus: A Powerful Fundraising Tool (Vol. 15, No. 1)

Action Steps for Effective Governance: Test Yourself (Vol. 35, No. 3)

Reciprocal Board Agreements: What Do Board Members Give? What Do They Receive in Return? (Vol. 28, No. 1)

Get Ready for a Better Audit (Vol. 30, No. 2)

The Board Member's First Duty: Accountability (Vol. 18, No. 6)

“Leadership and management are often confused.”

Both are important. Executive directors are often stronger in one area than the other, but they must focus on both to be successful.

Executive directors must, first of all, be clear about their strengths and weaknesses in each area. Then, they need to surround themselves with staff and volunteers who bolster their areas of weakness.

Executive directors use the direction and boundaries provided by the board to create plans and policies that ensure the organization will perform its work and maintain its integrity. To accomplish this, they do the following:

Establish operational policies.


Organize resource-development efforts.

Hire and manage personnel.

Create processes and procedures to ensure services are delivered consistently.

Manage the day-to-day tasks of keeping the organization moving forward. These tasks may be done by internal staff or by outsourced services (for example, staff may hire an accounting firm for accounting tasks). Regardless of who does the work, these operational tasks are the executive director's responsibility.

Executive directors are also responsible for providing the board with the information needed to monitor the organization. They provide the reports needed for board members to monitor the organization's policies. Boards often perform external monitoring on policies that protect the organization from liability. In these cases, staff members work with an external auditor to provide audit information.

Table 1 compares roles in some common areas within an organization. Successful organizations recognize these differing roles for boards and staff. Neither role is more important than the other, but each will be sorely missed if not done properly. It's crucial that the board chair and executive director work together to coach the members of their respective "teams" to stay within the boundaries of their role. 

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