

Board-Staff Relationships: An Uncomfortable Partnership?


Are staff and board members doomed to be uncomfortable with each other? Here's how the board can take the lead in forging a productive relationship.

By Eugene Fram

I've always believed nonprofit board members don't give sufficient consideration to the relationships between the board and staff. As Ellen Cunniffe notes in *Nonprofit Quarterly*, those responsible for the organization's oversight aren't the people who show up each day to do the work, complicating the relationship on both sides ("When a Board Seat Becomes Uncomfortable," www.nonprofitquarterly.org/governancevoice/22635-when-a-board-seat-becomes-uncomfortable.html). That problem is intensified in small to mid-sized nonprofits, where the lines between governance and management are more easily blurred.

Since board and staff are both vital parts in the nonprofit partnership engine, it's critical that the parts be well oiled so that the organization may smoothly move forward in meeting its mission. Here are a few things board members can do:

- **Respect and celebrate staff accomplishments**, both individually and as a group.
- **Meet with staff in small groups** and on appropriate problem-solving committee assignments.
- **Develop interest and understanding of the work the organization's employees do** and the challenges they face.
- **Encourage staff to provide brief informational updates** at board meetings or online.
- **As much as possible, try to develop a collegial, not authoritarian, relationship** with staff. They're well aware that the board has final authority.
- **As suggested by Sarbanes-Oxley, establish a board procedure** that encourages board members, on occasion, to interact with key employees below the management level.
- **Be sensitive to staff sensitivities and concerns**, such as whether board-mandated changes will interfere with the organization's collegiality and sense of caring. Show the staff that you have a robust understanding of the challenges they face daily and that you share their passion for the organization's mission.

Do your staff and board work together in harmony or in an uncomfortable or mistrusting manner? Take a moment to assess and, if necessary, take time to tune up the partnership. Your nonprofit will be the beneficiary! 

Eugene Fram, Ed.D. (frameugene@gmail.com, blog site: <http://bit.ly/yfRZpz>), is professor emeritus at the Saunders College of Business, Rochester Institute of Technology. In 2008, Fram was awarded the university's Presidential Medallion for Outstanding Service. In 2012, a former student gifted Rochester Institute of Technology \$3 million to establish the Eugene H. Fram Chair in Applied Critical Thinking. Fram's book Policy vs. Paper Clips (available in new edition at <http://amzn.to/eu7nQl>) has been used by thousands of nonprofits to model their board structures.



Stay in Tune

Bring board and staff into accord with these articles at www.NonprofitWorld.org/members:

Boards Can't Go It Alone: Forging the Board-Executive Partnership (Vol. 14, No. 2)

The Board-Savvy CEO (Vol. 26, No. 2)

Building a Strong Board-Exec Relationship (Vol. 21, No. 4)

How to Assess and Improve Your Board's Performance (Vol. 24, No. 1)

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

Eight Questions Every Board Member Needs to Answer (Vol. 22, No. 3)

The Sarbanes-Oxley Act & Nonprofits: But I Thought That Didn't Apply to Us (Vol. 22, No. 5)

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

Seven Creative Ways to Energize Your Board (Vol. 16, No. 3)

A Board Member Self-Assessment (Vol. 15, No. 6)

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

Building a Rock-Solid Board-CEO Partnership: Talking With CEO Virginia Jacko (Vol. 27, No. 3)

Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Board Governance (www.NonprofitWorld.org/LearningInstitute).