

TALKING POINTS

Become a highly effective nonprofit board chair in seven steps

BY ELKA T. SACHS

You have served with enthusiasm on the board of directors of a nonprofit organization whose mission is dear to your heart, and now you have been elected to serve as chairman of the board.

Whether you were elected in recognition of your past service, because you have talents desired by the board, because you helped found the organization and are identified with its mission, or because you are a significant donor who is expected to reinvigorate the organization's fundraising, the board of directors has expressed its confidence in you by electing you as chairman.

What are your next steps?

Although different nonprofit organizations have different expectations of their leaders, rooted in the operational needs, sectors of practice, missions and organizational cultures of every nonprofit organization is the need for an effective leader at its helm.

Here are seven key steps that you can take to become a highly effective chairman of the board.

Step 1: Meetings

As chairman of the board, you will establish a regular board meeting schedule, set each meeting's agenda and preside over meetings. You can prepare for board meetings by consulting with the organization's chief executive officer and



with board committee chairs.

Comprehensive preparation will enable you to understand the issues percolating among board members and within the organization to determine when and how these issues are discussed at board meetings, and to ensure that appropriate information is provided for board review, ideally in advance of meetings.

Preparation alone, however, is insufficient to ensure effective board meetings. You must actively manage your meetings. When you set clear priorities, encourage active participation, facilitate problem-solving and consensus, and summarize the board's conclusions

at the end of each meeting, your board meetings are more likely to be productive and the board's decisions are more likely to be implemented.

Step 2: The board

To maximize the board's effectiveness, you will need to assess the strengths and weaknesses of its composition. You should participate in recruiting board members with qualities needed by your organization and in the orientation of new board members.

In every organization, some tasks are delegated to board committees. Common examples include finance, fundraising, board governance and nominations.

As chairman of the board, it will be important for you to assess the effectiveness of the board committee structure. Board responsibilities must be delegated equitably among board members.

Most important, you must maintain contact with committee chairs and provide them with adequate support in order to assure that delegated tasks are accomplished.

Step 3: The CEO

To build a strong organization, you must work together with the chief executive officer. To develop an effective partnership with the CEO, your relationship must be based on mutual trust, respect and

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support, and regular and open communication.

As chairman of the board, you might criticize the CEO in private while serving as his or her personal advisor with regard to organizational matters. In public, however, you must serve as the CEO's lead supporter.

Step 4: Oversight and compliance

The members of the board oversee the organization's financial affairs as fiduciaries of the organization. As chairman of the board, you will set the standard for the board's oversight by ensuring that board members are adequately informed, encouraging board members to ask questions, constituting the board's finance and fundraising committees with qualified members, monitoring the activities of those committees, setting financial goals for the CEO and reviewing achievement of those goals.

Similarly, you will set the tone for legal compliance by your attention to tax filings, conflicts of interest, regulatory compliance and other legal requirements.

Step 5: The face

As chairman of the board, you are a public representative of the organization. You will be asked to represent the organization at public functions and before donors.

You should become actively involved in fundraising and use every opportunity in your personal and professional life to promote the organization and its mission.

Step 6: Reviews and assessments

Annual reviews and assessments are necessary for organizational improvement. As chairman of the board, you are responsible for ensuring that the CEO's performance is reviewed each year and that annual review processes are implemented for all personnel.

You should also promote regular assessments of the organization's successes and failures as well as a self-assessment of the performance of the board and its members.

Step 7: Strategic planning

Annual assessments provide opportunities to reflect upon past successes and failures, and to set goals for the future. Ideally, these goals should reflect the organization's long-term strategic plan.

If the organization does not have a strategic plan, you should initiate a strategic planning process.

If a strategic plan exists, one of your responsibilities will be to promote and monitor the organization's achievement of its long-term goals.

Planning for the future also means developing a succession

plan for the CEO and assuring that succession plans exist for other key personnel.

As chairman of the board, you must also consider your own succession. If your successor is known, you can make the transition easier by including him or her in discussions with the CEO and committee chairs before the end of your term.

If your term ends with the election of your successor, you can meet with your successor and maintain contact on an as-needed basis.

Being elected chairman of a non-profit board is an honor, but it involves serious responsibilities to the organization, the CEO and the other board members.

Your diligence in fulfilling these responsibilities, which includes taking these seven steps, can help you to be a highly effective chairman and to achieve success for the organization and your colleagues on the board.

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