

## **Build Confidence in the Board Chair**

Bob Harris, CAE

Before the first meeting the incoming board chair confessed to the executive director, “I don’t feel confident about my boardroom skills. I’m nervous. What can I do to improve my competency?”

It’s a fair question. It is better to be honest than to fake confidence that will quickly be recognized by the rest of the board.

“It’s a concern that an incoming chair relies too heavily on the staff, either because they don’t accept their responsibility, are unsure of their roles, or they believe the staff can do everything. It requires a balanced partnership and the confidence of the chair,” said Lisa Workman, the president and CEO at the Fergus Falls Area Chamber of Commerce in Minnesota.

Try these ideas to instill confidence and find the balance between the elected chair and paid CEO.

1. **Leadership Training** – Enroll in a leadership training course for the elected chair and executive director. The course allows for knowledge development and building a partnership.
2. **Books** – An executive director may have books to guide the chair. For example, a copy of *Good to Great* will explain the importance of mission and “who is on the bus” and in what seats. *The Perfect Board* offers vignettes on how a good board operates. Organizations such as BoardSource, ASAE and ACCE provide resources.
3. **Professional Counsel** – There may be areas in which the chair wants to call in professional help. Use the counsel of an attorney, CPA, parliamentarian or insurance consultant to answer questions and improve confidence.
4. **Orientation** – Whether or not the board thinks they need it, it is important to provide an annual orientation. Directors should be refreshed on topics such as rules of order, finances and the strategic plan. They benefit from an update of the governing documents, board protocols and their duties. A comprehensive orientation adds confidence to everyone on the board.

5. **Agenda Development** – The chair and executive director should collaborate on creating the meeting agenda. Use the time to improve understanding of the desired vision and outcomes for meetings and the organization.
6. **Boardroom Seating** – Who sits next to the chair can have an influence. Avoid persons who cause distractions. The vice chair may be a good table partner or the executive director can offer cues for chairing the meeting.
7. **Meeting Scripts** – A script with some prompts of what and when to say it can be useful. Wean the chair off the need for staff-developed scripts as they gain experience.
8. **Parliamentary Procedure** – Rules of order can be awkward. There are books and cheat sheets to make rules easy to understand and apply, especially *Robert's Rule of Order for Dummies* or *A-B-Cs of Parliamentary Procedure*.
9. **Call on Counterparts** – The chair can reach out to leaders in allied organizations. For example a state association, has 49 other state peers who might share tips to build confidence. A local chamber has regional organizations who are happy to answer questions.
10. **Board Meeting Debriefings** – After the board adjourns hang back a few minutes to ask, “How’d you think the meeting went?” Compare notes on what occurred and how to make enhancements for the next meeting. Ideas could include seating arrangement, agenda style, handouts and reports, etc.
11. **Soft Skills Development** – Not all fears come from governance, board meetings and rules of order. Soft skills have an influence, too. Identify weaknesses to get soft-skills training, for instance reading body language, building consensus and handling conflict.
12. **Past Leaders’ Support** – Invite some past chairs to mentor the new board chair. Their experience, tips and encouragement can heighten confidence.
13. **Delegation** – The chair may feel pressure to achieve significant results. Officers and other directors are there to help and accept responsibilities.
14. **Strategic Map** – The strategic plan is the roadmap. A frequent question by the board chair should be, “How does this advance our strategic plan?”

Transform the strategic plan into a form for easy reference, for example a one-page placemat format at the board table.

15. **Have Fun** – Governance sounds serious, but the directors are volunteers. Take time to have fun, schedule breaks, and celebrate big and small achievements.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at [www.nonprofitcenter.com](http://www.nonprofitcenter.com).