

How to Repair a Broken CEO-Board Chair Relationship

ASAE: The Center for Association Leadership | Mark Athitakis | Jun 20, 2022

Distrust at the top can be surprisingly common at associations, and enduring, one researcher found. Fixing it requires both long- and short-term planning.

When it comes to the relationship between an association CEO and the board chair, trust is critical. But what do you do when that trust is lacking?

Dr. M. Louise Walters, founder and CEO of the consultancy the Leadership Center, recently completed her PhD thesis research on CEO-board chair relations at 501(c)(6) business leagues [PDF]. In conversation with 10 CEOs, she found that four of them didn't trust their board chair.

"Respondents said things like, 'I don't know how I can trust them because they don't communicate with me' or 'They go around my back and do things that obligate the organization outside of what their purview really should be,'" Walters said.

That's a problem, of course, because without trust it's hard to make much in the way of progress. But what Walters also found in her interviewing is that the divide isn't necessarily personal. A lack of trust between one chair and CEO can contribute to an air of distrust that lasts even after one chair's term is over.

"The more frequently CEOs have an opportunity to communicate with their board chairs, the better, because that breaks down barriers."

"Those kinds of relationships seem to carry over from year to year," says Walters, who will share her findings at an ASAE Annual Meeting and Expo session, "Adversary or Trusted Partner? What CEOs Think About Their Board Chairs," at 11:30 a.m. on Monday, August 22. "And when you're in a cycle like that, it's sometimes hard to break it. CEOs who wanted to make things more positive had a more difficult time doing that, and then accomplishing what they needed to accomplish in their organization as well."

When it comes to breaking that cycle, Walters says, communication is essential. As one study participant told her, "The responsibility is on you to get to know your board chair, get to know their triggers, get to know their priorities, and to be able to balance making the organization successful while the chair is successful as well." One step in that direction can be as simple as finding common ground on communications tools that work for both leaders—phone calls during business hours may be a bad fit for a chair who prefers text and email.

And however you communicate, do it often—Walters found that most CEOs were in contact with their chairs weekly or two to three times per month. "The more frequently that they have

an opportunity to communicate with their board chairs, the better, because then that breaks down barriers," she said.

Better communication in the short term, though, needs to be paired with long-term planning around board orientation. "[As a CEO] you have to get to know your people," she said. "Know them as they're coming up as a committee member, and as a committee chair, and all the way up to the board chair. Because the more that you know about them, the more helpful that you as a CEO are going to be, and the more fruitful and positive that the relationship is probably going to end up. And that means that the CEO understands the dynamics of developing volunteer leaders and leadership talent."

And once the volunteer leaders better understand their role, CEOs are more free to run—and improve—the association. Walters asked her study's subjects what piece of advice CEOs would give to a board chair. Respondents generally encouraged chairs to focus on trust: "Your CEO is not ever going to embarrass you," one said. "It's in no one's best interest for you as the board chair to look surprised, embarrassed, or ill-equipped."

But another respondent's advice highlights the potential consequences of an ongoing rift: "If you don't have trust in your CEO, then choose another one."