

How Board Chairs Foster Board Engagement

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Successful organizations have engaged boards with members who are passionate about the organization's mission and collective purpose, ask challenging questions, make informed decisions, collaborate with each other, and promote the organization and its work to their networks. Yet board engagement doesn't happen overnight or on its own; it must be fostered. Here are four tips on how the board chair can foster nonprofit board engagement.

1. Build Relationships as the Chair of the Board

The **board chair's responsibility** to facilitate and foster engagement requires they also build strong relationships among board members and a strong partnership with the chief executive. When this is a priority, it allows the board chair to better facilitate discussions and ensure that everyone's voice is heard and valued.

Fostering meaningful peer relationships ultimately leads to a more engaged board and stronger governance. A chair's understanding of the personalities and communication styles of individual board members is crucial. Some board members may be more introverted and prefer to participate in one-on-one conversations, while others may be more extroverted and thrive in group discussions. By recognizing these differences, the board chair can tailor their facilitation approach to best engage each board member.

Lastly, a strong partnership between the board chair and the chief executive can propel an organization toward greatness. The board chair's partnership with the CEO is the most important relationship. An organization does not succeed if its two key leaders are not working collaboratively or if they fail to develop a culture of mutual respect and trust. While the board chair is responsible for the overall governance of an organization and managing the board, the daily management of the organization is the purview of the chief executive. Board chairs who fully understand their governance responsibilities and the line between their role and the role of the chief executive in relation to the organization's goals, have an advantage in working strategically with both the board and the chief executive.

2. Create Engaging Board Meetings

As the leader of the board, it is the responsibility of the chair to prepare and facilitate board meetings. They are responsible for establishing clear channels of communication and ensuring that all board members have access to necessary information and resources in a timely manner. Furthermore, the board chair should encourage open and transparent interactions among board members. They set the standard for diverse perspectives to be heard, promote active listening and create a board culture where all members feel valued.

When the board meeting includes informal social time (this often takes place during meals) and during which business is secondary, board members can get to know one another in a more relaxed setting. Additionally, incorporating "mission moments" in board meetings can help strengthen board members' connections.

The board chair can facilitate engaged meetings by:

- ▶ Crafting the agenda – in collaboration with the chief executive– and identifying action items and strategic and generative questions to help guide the discussion.
- ▶ Encouraging all board members to speak, ensuring all voices are heard and valued.
- ▶ Ensuring that no one dominates the conversation. This may require board chairs to pay special attention to involving more quiet or introverted board members.
- ▶ Monitoring the engagement and interest levels of the room. Spending too long on an issue can lead to fatigue, which might impact later discussions of equal importance.
- ▶ Holding discussions at a strategic, high level.
- ▶ Being objective and fair. Board chairs should not be afraid of controversial issues and opinions – the board should be able to have an open discussion without judgment. Board chairs should also be careful not to let their personal opinions influence their facilitation. Once the board chair has determined that an item has been fully discussed and all board members have weighed in, the chair shares their opinion, participates in the vote, and stewards the issue to conclusion.

While the chief executive is an important part of all board meetings, their role is to introduce pertinent organizational issues, answer questions, provide insight, and make recommendations yet not facilitate the meeting.

3. Ensure a Robust Committee Structure

Committees allow the board to divide the work and the labor. Committees also allow board members to work in their area of expertise or learn a new skill. A robust **committee structure** creates the circumstances for board members to be engaged, have meaningful work, and also provide a path to leadership, both at the committee or officer level.

Committees contribute to effective board engagement because the board meetings are less likely to get bogged down in committee work, allowing the board to focus on generative and strategic discussion and deliberations. Task forces may be used for time-limited work.

4. Evaluate and Adjust Engagement Strategies

Engagement strategies should not be static, but rather continuously evaluated and adjusted based on the needs and dynamics of the board. The board chair should regularly seek feedback from individual board members about board process.

By evaluating the impact of board process, the board chair can identify areas for improvement and make necessary adjustments to enhance engagement and collaboration. It's important for the board chair to be flexible and adaptable in their approach, as the organization, the board and its members may have different needs over time.

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