

## **Habits of an effective chair**

Serving as the chair of the board is not a role for the indolent and undecided. To do the job right demands at times exceptional and supernatural qualities, endless energy, and undivided attention and commitment. And usually all that without financial recompense. To accept the responsibility to be in charge of a nonprofit board and to serve as an effective leader — not just a figurehead — assumes that the chair possesses the characteristics and conduct that make the job produce results. This paper generously borrows from Steven Covey's principles of highly effective people and translates those concepts into the habits of effective board chairs.

### **1. Plan ahead**

Being proactive is not just a good quality for a chair. It is a universal quality in a leader who does not want to get caught off guard. Planning ahead allows the chair not to miss the important issues, deadlines or activities. Planning ensures that the board is constantly on the right track and involved in transactions that are part of the organization's mandate. To plan well the chair

- Schedules board meetings at least a year ahead of time
- Drafts meeting agendas with the chief executive to incorporate items focusing on strategic issues affecting the future of the organization and the board itself
- Brings the board together every few years around a structured strategic planning setting to fine-tune the direction the organization is taking

### **2. Show vision**

Knowing where you are going makes it easier to get there. With a clear vision — no matter how idealistic and inspirational it is — it is possible to make decisions that are aligned with the overall direction of the organization. A board chair should be a visionary leader who is able to keep the rest of the board focused on the big picture and understanding the potential impact that the organization is able to have. As a visionary, the chair

- Focuses past the every-day challenges and keeps the organization anchored to its higher goals and ideals
- Radiates competency, decisiveness and trustworthiness, which attracts the confidence of the rest of the board and keeps it motivated and committed to the chosen itinerary
- Senses new trends as they are still forming and ensures that the external and internal threats and opportunities are constantly taken into account

### **3. Prioritize**

A resourceful person constantly generates new ideas. An energetic and committed person tends to have more things in the agenda than he is able to accomplish. At the same time, all activities cannot be planned; they often demand attention in the most inopportune times. Efficient time management and prioritizing issues is the key to survival. To prioritize, the chair

- Guides the board to address issues that need timely attention and that enhance the organization's long-term impact
- Forms task forces to help research arguments before meetings and uses consent agendas to save meeting time for full board deliberation and decision making
- Relies on the skills and expertise of individual board members to delegate tasks that do not need full board involvement

#### **4. Lead and collaborate**

An effective chair understands that the board functions as a team. An effective chair works with the chief executive as a partner. These are not adversarial relationships. When the chair does a good job, the entire board is invigorated by this leadership, and the organization comes out as the ultimate winner. Isn't that the goal after all? To invite collaboration, the chair

- Habitually recognizes the contributions of fellow board members and publicly thanks them for their hard work
- Initiates a regular communication system with the chief executive to cement a close professional relationship and to leverage mutual expertise
- Represents the organization in the community and scopes out possible ideas for collaboration with other nonprofits and for-profit supporters

#### **5. Listen and hear**

When communicating with fellow board members a good chair does not make assumptions. The chair has an unbiased ear that hears what is being said and not what he or she wants to hear. To incorporate everyone's ideas, a good chair

- Considers himself as one opinion among the many that ultimately form the consensus while serving as the example for the sought after qualities in a board member
- Constantly seeks feedback from peers and encourages innovative thinking while resolving conflicts by talking to individual board members about mutual challenges
- Uses devil's advocates during deliberation to form a more complete picture of an issue

#### **6. Diversify**

A chair understands that the strength of the board lies in its resourcefulness, which only is possible if the member base is diversified. It is evident that numerous heads together work better than one alone. A diverse board is able to sense the needs of the constituents and reach them directly. As a group leader, the chair

- Eliminates rubberstamping as a result of groupthink from the board as a negative force
- Ensures that the board is constantly cultivating new members and recruiting members who fill any gaps in the existing talent pool
- Rejects token representation as a method to meet the goals of diversity

#### **7. Learn and evolve**

Without continuous focus on self-renewal, the board stagnates and inevitably misses the opportunities around it. The chair realizes that the board as a group and individual board members must have opportunities for improvement and learning. Board development becomes a standard budgetary item. To achieve a learning board, the chair

- Ensures that all board members go through structured orientation, understand what their role and responsibilities are, and are actively contributing their specific skills and expertise
- Incorporates a board self-assessment every two or three years in the board's agenda
- Advocates for term limits as a tool to bring in new blood on a regular basis

## References

- Covey, Steven. *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Simon & Schuster, 1989. Available at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)
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