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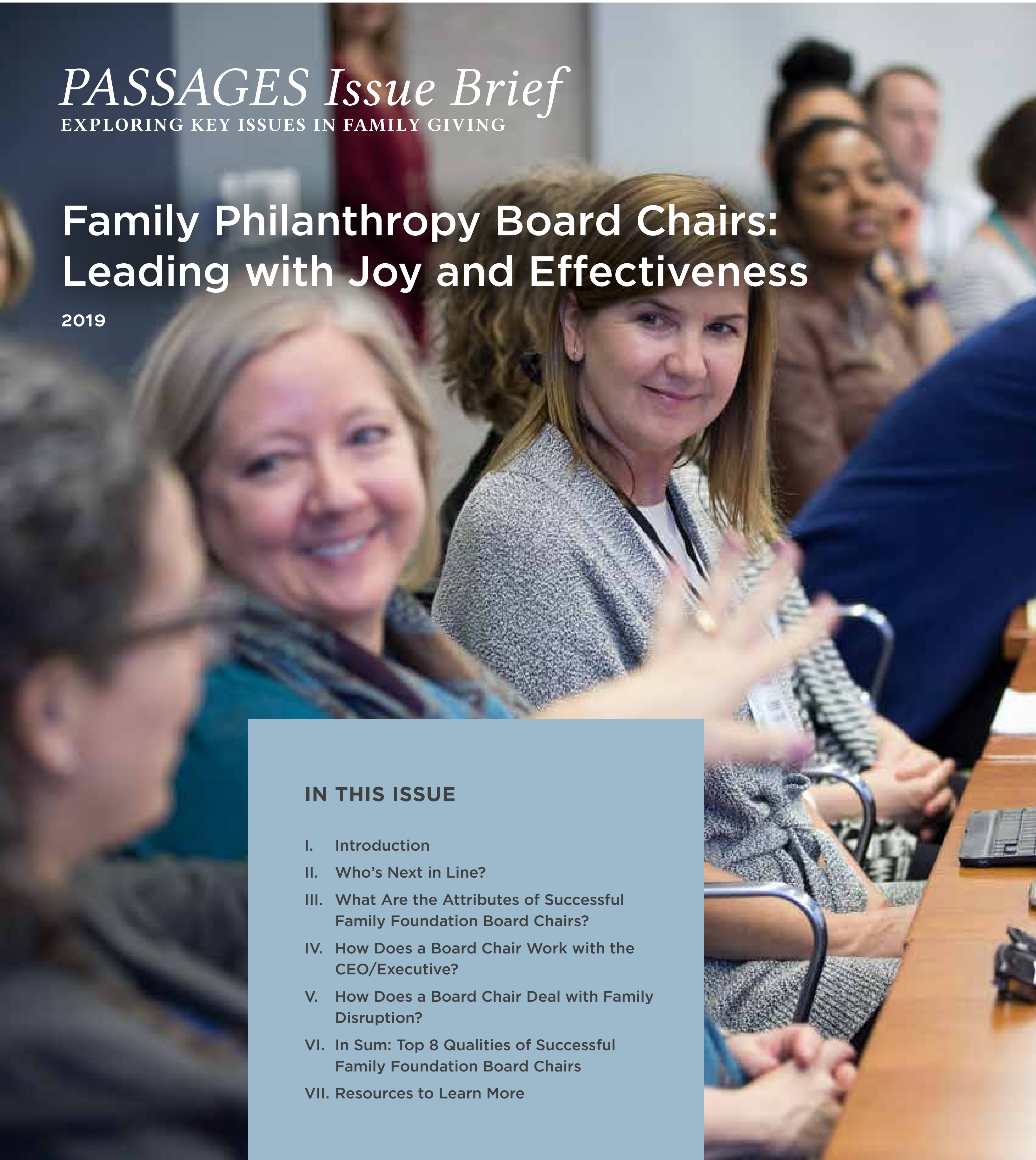
FAMILY PHILANTHROPY



PASSAGES Issue Brief

EXPLORING KEY ISSUES IN FAMILY GIVING

Family Philanthropy Board Chairs: Leading with Joy and Effectiveness

2019

IN THIS ISSUE

I. Introduction

A board chair is perhaps the most important and meaningful job in any family foundation. If you are currently chair—or anticipate that you will be someday—you may find it's one of the most rewarding roles you will ever have. It's also a role of great nuance, calling for keen facilitation, leadership, and a healthy dose of self-awareness—a combination that's not always easy to find.

As in any nonprofit organization, board chairs lead the foundation in its responsibilities related to fiscal oversight, strategic direction, and governance. Yet there's a key difference: Family foundation board chairs lead within the context of a family culture—one rife with long-standing relationships, roles, and beliefs (and perhaps some baggage) that family members hold about one another. This can make the job as chair all the more gratifying, as you lead and learn together as a board—whether the board comprises your own family or not. It can also, at times, be tricky.

Those serving in this capacity need the leadership skills needed to run smooth, productive board meetings. Yet that's just the beginning. Board chairs set forth or support the vision and culture of the foundation, and work closely with the CEO/staff executive to prioritize what's important. In fact, the board chair/CEO relationship can make a big difference in how well the board as a whole performs.

This *Passages* is ideal for current board chairs, future board chairs, or boards trying to identify who will be the next best fit for this essential role. It's also helpful for CEOs/staff executives who are working with a new or seasoned board chair. Questions addressed in this board discussion paper include:

- Who serves as board chair in family philanthropy, and how does the board decide?
- What do successful family foundation board chairs do?
- What board chair skills, qualities, and aptitudes lead to better boards?
- What challenges do board chairs face?
- How do board chairs and CEOs/staff executives work together to strengthen the board and foundation's performance?

Board chairs—those who are, have been, or hope to be—will find answers to these questions and more in their pursuit of strong governance.

> "Leading your cousins, siblings, or uncles—who all know your personal and family history—makes the family foundation board chair role different than any other. It's personal—and I've found it trickier than any role I've had. Yet it's also a great opportunity to bond as a family."
>
> *– Kelly Sweeney McShane, The William J. and Dorothy K. O'Neill Foundation*

II. Who's Next in Line?

Boards that carefully consider the role of chair set themselves up for success. The most thoughtful family foundations create a formalized process for choosing a chair—including a selection process, often established by a nominating or governance committee. As an example of a selection process, the committee might invite prospective board candidates to apply (even those candidates who are long-standing family members), vet their skills and time/commitment level, and then recommend a candidate to the board.

Of course, it doesn't always work like this—especially as a foundation is getting started.

Early on in family foundations, a founder or spouse typically takes the role of board chair. The founding chair might stay in his or her role for years (or even decades). Yet, when it comes time for the founder to step down—either by choice or by circumstance—the question will arise: Who's next in line?

Sometimes the answer is quite obvious. In smaller families or boards, and those that aren't open to nonfamily board members or chairs, there may only be one or two second generation family members to choose from. An opposite challenge is when there are many choices, causing underlying or outspoken tension among siblings or cousins who may hope to be the founder's "first pick."

In some family boards, the chair job is an honorific one, where everyone gets a turn. This may be a fine and fair strategy at first, yet beyond the second generation—as the family gets bigger—boards should strongly consider setting criteria for who can be board chair. This calls for honest discussion about the competencies your board needs and wants in a chair, and who among current board members might fit the bill (if they are interested in the position, which isn't always a given).

Questions you might consider, related to a candidate's interpersonal capacities, include:

- What skill sets, expertise, and personality style best suits the position?
- How well can this person present, lead, and facilitate meetings?
- Is this person willing to take on difficult work as it arises?
- How well does this person communicate honestly and openly with others, and include/engage/listen to others in conversation?

- In what ways does this person avoid or manage conflict and challenges?
- How well will this person work with the CEO/staff executive? What kind of trust and relationship already exists between them, or will be intentionally built?
- For family candidates: what kind of reputation, standing, and relationships do they hold among the family? How well will this person rise above family dynamics and roles to lead effectively?

“Without terms for the board chair, there is a risk that people might feel it is a lifetime appointment—or sentence.”

– David Orr, David & Lucile Packard Foundation

And then the more practical questions:

- Must the board chair be a family member? Or are nonfamily/community board members eligible to chair the board?
- What are the board’s requirements for the chair regarding age minimum/maximum, education, number of years on the board, and/or professional experience with nonprofits, boards, etc.?
- How much time must the board chair dedicate to the position (and does the person have this time to commit?)?
- What terms or rotation policies does the board have (or will it put into place) for the board chair?

Tip: Create a job description for the board chair and other of cers if your board doesn’t have one already. Depending on the style and culture of your foundation, this job description can be quite simple—a short list of bullet points—or it could be a more formal narrative. If you have a small board, you can craft the job description as a group; for a larger board, you will likely assign it to a nominating or governance committee, if you have one. See NCFP’s Knowledge Center for sample board chair job descriptions.

Terms and Rotation Policies

If there are many candidates for board chair, terms and rotation policies can work well to give many a chance to serve. A term is a set number of years a board chair can serve, and term limits or rotation policies preclude a chair from serving a number of consecutive terms—thereby inviting in new leadership with fresh perspectives. For example, a rotation policy whereby a board chair serves a three- to five-year term, and then must rotate out of the role for a minimum of five years, allows different family members or community members to step into the role, and tends to relieve any tension around who goes first.

“Without terms, it’s too easy to keep someone in the same role, and hard to get rid of them,” says Mary Mountcastle of the Mary Reynolds Babcock and Z. Smith Reynolds Foundations. “It’s good for the board to experience change.”

Even with term limits and rotation policies in place, it helps to remember: not every board member has the capacity or skills to be an effective board chair—and there are some who may flat-out have no interest.

One board chair suggests avoiding the phrase “we take turns” as board chair, as it sets up an expectation where everyone is

Colleague Story:

NAMING A NEW BOARD CHAIR—PROCESS MATTERS

A few years before he passed away, founder David Packard gave his middle daughter Susan Packard Orr the title of president of the David & Lucile Packard Foundation. "He was signaling to the other family members that I should be in charge when he wasn't there. He didn't talk to my siblings first; he just did it. That's the way he was," says Packard Orr.

"Once he was gone, one of the general trustees (a nonfamily member) nominated me to be chair, and some sibling issues bubbled up that I didn't realize were there," she says. "I was named board chair without any process or finesse, and one of my sisters, in particular, felt like the board should have consulted her first."

"In retrospect, I could have been more deliberate about talking with my siblings about it," she says. "The nonfamily CEO stepped in and talked with the family members, and at the time, we moved on. Yet, it was a highly emotional time, and if we had a process in place, it would have been so much easier—on my sisters, and on me."

As a new board chair, coming in a time of family loss, Packard Orr tried to be as inclusive of other family members as possible. "Of my two sisters, I was the one my father put in the leadership position, and I had to be sensitive to that. I made an effort to include people at every level," says Packard Orr. "For example, in the beginning, I made sure my sisters had a role on planning committees and other leadership opportunities. Even though I was the appointed chair, I wanted to make it clear to them this wasn't my game: we all had to do this together."

Fast-forward two decades.

When Packard Orr, after 21 years as board chair, decided it was time to rotate off, the board still had no process in place for bringing on a new chair.

"Having lived through what happens when there isn't a process, I felt strongly we needed one to nominate the next board chair," she says. She also felt strongly that nonfamily members should run the process. "We wanted nonfamily members to decide whom to recommend. I didn't want the family to get into it—it's too emotional," says Packard Orr.

With this decision, the board established a nominations committee—composed of nonfamily board members only—and a five-year term limit for board chairs. Today, a board member who has served for at least five years may self-nominate for the board chair role.

According to her son David Orr, "When my mom was ready to move on, the board understood this would be the passing of a generational torch. A couple of us from the third generation raised our hands expressing interest in the role, and then a nominating committee—all nonfamily members—interviewed us and made a recommendation to the board."

There was only one slightly awkward family moment about this, says David Orr. "My cousin and I were standing out in the hallway together while the board voted on which of the two of us would be the next chair. We each agreed we would be fine no matter how it turned out—and it has been."

The fact that there is a clear process—with term limits, he says, helped make it so.

automatically in. Instead, boards might consider framing it as an "ongoing invitation for interested candidates" to apply or express interest in the position.

"I get worried when I hear fairness is the overriding goal in deciding who will be the next board chair," says Ginny Esposito of NCFP in *The Critical Role of the Board Chair in Family Philanthropy* webinar (NCFP, 2015). "If a board chair must rotate off more quickly than he or she had a chance to understand the role or exert leadership—all in the name of fairness across branches, generations, or giving interests—that may not be in the board's best interest."

In other words, while term limits and rotation policies are important and practical tools, it can be detrimental to flip leadership too often or too fast. Give each board chair the time and support they need to learn and grow and lead.

Steve Toben, president of the Flora Family Foundation, expands on this point. "We need to remember these are family foundations, and not only those with proven leadership experience should be considered for the board chair role," he says. "Leadership is a learned skill, and not every board member—particularly those who are of the younger generation—may have all the skills and experience upfront to be a wildly successful board chair."

"Skill development can begin when a new person becomes board chair," Toben continues. "Someone younger or less experienced who has energy for the role may grow before our eyes, and we won't know until we give that person the opportunity. Sure, there is some risk in taking this approach, but I think it's worth it."

And for the new family foundation board chair coming on, David Orr of the Packard Foundation shares this advice: "It helps to remember that board members, especially those of the older generation, are there to see you succeed. Don't be afraid to ask for advice and lean on people."

"Anyone on the board—family or nonfamily—who has the time, skill set, knowledge about the culture and the board, and passion and commitment for it should be able to become chair. I would rather have a bigger pool than a smaller pool to choose from."

– Mary Mountcastle, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation and Z.Smith Reynolds Foundation

How Much, If Anything, Changes With a New Board Chair?

In any leadership transition, a natural question on everyone's minds is: what, if anything, will change?

When David Orr came into his role as board chair in 2018—the first new chair in decades—in some ways, the pressure was on. "Prior, the foundation had two board chairs: my grandfather, who did it until he died, and then my mom, who chaired the board for 21 years."

"I was conscious that this is a well-run high impact organization, and my first priority is not to screw it up," he says. "Second, I'm aware that everything I do in my first year is setting a precedent. This is the first transition that has happened in decades—how to handle that?"

"I was just going to say, 'Well, I don't make the rules.' But, of course, I do make the rules."

"I've been careful not to make big moves or impose change or signal everything is different. We shouldn't make big changes just because the board chair changes," he says. "Of course, there are things the foundation can or might do differently, and I know other board chairs might have strong opinions on this. Yet I believe in gentle nudges rather than drastic changes."

Steve Toben, president of the Flora Family Foundation, agrees with Orr's point. "I'm a governance conservative, by which I mean that I see real value in continuity," he says. "If you are a new board chair coming in replacing a long-term family chair, give some deference to your predecessor. Change gradually. Do not shy away from what needs to be changed, but take some time with that transition, rather than instituting a rapid shake up."

"My advice for a new board chair? Respect people's time. Learn how to read a budget. Don't look nervous. It can be hard—especially in front of your family, and especially if you are younger. Long-time board members may think they know better than you. Be confident in yourself and your ability to do it differently."

– Robin Snidow, General Service Foundation

III. What Are the Attributes of Successful Family Foundation Board Chairs?

Once a new board chair is in place, what happens next?

There are many good resources that describe the roles and responsibilities of foundation board chairs (see the sidebar on page 15 for one of them). As the foundation's leader, the chair—along with the CEO/staff executive—develops the agenda for board meetings, works with the executive committee, and leads the board meetings. Board chairs oversee the foundation's operations, facilitate group decision-making, deal with any difficulties that arise, and act as the foundation's lead public spokesperson. The chair is also responsible for recruiting, hiring, and evaluating the CEO/staff executive. The list goes on!

While board chairs of any organization share similar responsibilities, board chairs of family foundations have a more nuanced role. Not only must they facilitate the board, but they also must facilitate the *family* behind that board.

Here's what your family foundation colleagues say are the six most important things a *family* foundation board chair can do:

1. **Clarify the board's role.**
2. **Define and support board culture.**
3. **Frame and facilitate conversations.**
4. **Check your ego at the door.**
5. **Follow up, express appreciation, and let ideas unfold.**
6. **Assess board performance on a regular basis.**

1. Clarify the board's role.

It's the board chair's role to look and plan ahead. Yet before you do that, you need to clarify what the board's roles and responsibilities are—both the board as a whole, and as individual members. As one board chair puts it: In order to lead well, you have to know what it is you're leading.

If your family foundation doesn't already have its board roles and responsibilities in writing, this might be your first task as board chair. Luckily, you can rely on the expertise of others, and the many examples available to you in NCFP's Knowledge Center.

Boards may vary in size, membership, generations, and geography—yet they do share certain roles in common when it comes to good governance. In the book *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of the Nonprofit Board* (Chait, Ryan, and Taylor, 2005), the authors divide the work of boards into three categories: fiduciary, strategic, and generative.

1. *Fiduciary governance* (oversight) leads the board to examine tangible assets using facts, figures, financials, and risks. It requires being faithful to the mission, accountable in performance, and compliant with laws and regulations. Activities include overseeing investments, operational budgets, payout, individual grant approvals, conflicts of interest, and financial planning.

2. *Strategic governance* (foresight) leads the board to look at what is going on now, what the future might look like, set priorities, and use resources accordingly. Activities include strategic planning, setting grantmaking strategies, communicating with grantees and the public, and identifying the foundation's roles beyond grantmaking.

In order to lead well, you have to know what it is you're leading.

3. *Generative governance* (insight) leads the board to ask questions such as: What should we pay attention to, what does it mean, and what might we do about it? Activities include: articulating values, vision, and mission; examining the board's role and performance; clarifying board membership and nominations; planning for succession; engaging the next generation; and paying attention to board learning and development.

As a family foundation board chair, working in close partnership with the CEO/staff executive, it's your job to make sure individual board members are aware of these three modes of governance, and what each requires of them. You may or may not use the framework above, yet it can be helpful in discussing if and how the board is governing well within these three areas, and which areas need improvement.

Why is this helpful? As explained by Cathy A. Trower, author of *The Practitioner's Guide to Governance as Leadership*, "The benefits of working in the three modes—either sequentially or simultaneously—[lead to] less micromanagement [on the part of the board] and more macro-governance, higher levels of board engagement, better board preparation, more value-added and intellectual brainpower, and better deliberations and decisions."

In other words—board members who are *clear on their roles* make for a much better (meaning more effective) board.

Some experts say that the generative work of the family foundation board is by far the most interesting and important work of the board. NCFP's senior fellow Alice Buhl points out that "the results of the generative work tend to ripple out into all other areas of the foundation." In the generative mode, the board chair role, in partnership with the staff executive, serves as a "sense maker" for the foundation—framing issues, discerning emerging challenges and opportunities, probing assumptions and values, and, in a real sense, "deciding what to decide."[1]

"As board chair... you can bring your board members' hearts and souls and minds into the proposition."

– Michelle Knapik, Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation

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[1] Source: Chait, R., Ryan, W. & Taylor, B. *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards*, BoardSource and John Wiley & Sons, 2005.

Most family foundations don't jump into the generative work right away. Early in a family foundation's life cycle, boards typically attend to the financial and strategic modes of governance only, perhaps without much time or thought given to the generative needs. Yet, as a foundation grows, and as the generations evolve, it becomes ever more important to clarify and strengthen the board itself, now and for the future.

"I'm a big fan of the governance leadership model," says Michelle Knapik, president of the Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation of New Haven, Connecticut. "In the context of new board leadership, examining family traditions and foundation values and beliefs in the sense of where we're heading and how we show up—these are generative conversations that inform the rest of our work."

The board chair must carry vital pieces forward, says Knapik: the values and influences across various generations, being able to understand each other cross-generationally, and being able to articulate what are today's expressions of the foundation's core values and why? "This is all generative governance work," she says. "If you, as a family foundation board chair, know you have to be the holder of these conversations and create the space for them, you can bring your board members' hearts and souls and minds into the proposition."

2. Define and support board culture.

A family foundation board chair sets the tone for board culture. This culture may come directly from the family culture, or it may be a hybrid based on who's at the board table. Yet culture is something that can't be assumed. Every board chair must set certain standards for culture, or reinforce the culture that has been working well.

What does it mean, though, to define or reinforce culture? As you will see, culture is about both the big stuff and the little stuff. Here are some ideas, courtesy of Alice Buhl's presentation in *The Critical Role of the Board Chair in Family Philanthropy* webinar (NCFP, 2015) and other family foundation colleagues:

- **Meetings**—discuss expectations for board members and how often the board will meet; set the time, agenda, tone, and roles of others in the room; establish ground rules for how board members will interact at meetings (and in the parking lot after meetings)
- **Relationships**—make times for meals, socializing, and other non-boardroom time together, giving board members time to relax and bond; deal swiftly and directly with any personal or family difficulties that make their way into the boardroom (see *How Does a Board Chair Deal with Family Disruption?* on page 21)
- **Engagement**—recognize that each person has something to contribute, encourage all board members (family and nonfamily) to voice their opinions and ideas, offer opportunities for learning and board development

- **Succession planning**—take time to plan for change (even if it seems far-fetched at the moment), particularly for leadership transitions of the chair, senior generation, officers, and CEO/staff executive
- **Assess board performance**—regularly reflect on what's going well, and what needs to improve, both as an entire board and as individual board members (see *Assess Board Performance on a Regular Basis* on page 14.)

Board chairs setting forth culture within a family context may feel slightly self-conscious. Mary Mountcastle recalls stepping into her role as board chair (which they call *president* at her foundation), and attempting to create a professional tone with her family members around the table.

"The first time I was board chair, my mom was on the board. I wondered, what do I call her during meetings—Mom? Or by her first name?" she says. (She chose to use her mother's first name.) "Being a board chair is being a professional, even if you are doing it on a volunteer basis. Your brothers, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, cousins—they are just people on the board like everyone else. It's important to neutralize family relationships as best as possible, treat everyone fairly, and signal that the family, while in board meetings or on foundation time, is in a professional space."

Even in the midst of professionalism and with nonfamily members in the room, the foundation is *still* based on a *family*—and comprises all the personalities, quirks, and inside understandings that go along with that.

Susan Packard Orr says this: "We have a board culture where we agree to disagree. It comes from our long-time family culture as conflict avoiders. My sisters and I get along well and respect each other; we listen to each other, and know we won't always agree. Yet we never go at it with each other, and certainly not in the foundation boardroom."

What goes far in her family, says Orr, is its sense of humor. "Our family is big on teasing each other, and this part of our family culture is present on the board. It brings a lightness to board meetings."

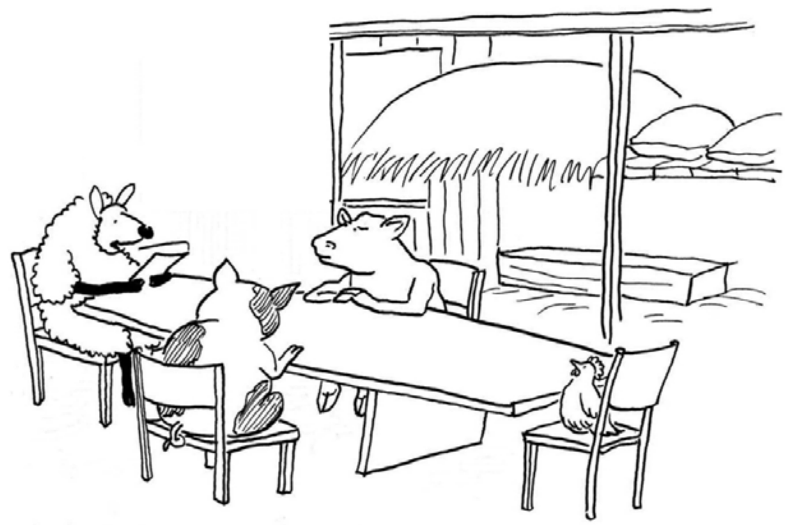
At the McKnight Foundation, the board chair starts each meeting by asking members to share personally about their lives or work outside the foundation. "It starts the board meetings off on a personal, conversational tone, and it level-sets everyone in the room. This is a time to get to know people as people rather than simply colleagues on the board. It's a simple act, and yet it reinforces the culture of the foundation," says Kate Wolford, president of the foundation.

"Culture is everything. Policies provide direction and protect the board against worst-case scenarios, but it is culture that propels the board forward."

– Kate Wolford, McKnight Foundation

3. Frame and facilitate conversations.

"Family foundation board members live busy lives," says Kelly Sweeney McShane, chair of The William J. and Dorothy K O'Neill Foundation in Cleveland, Ohio. "The board chair's job is to make sure everyone is brought into the same story—even though they may come in at different times—and to remind them where we've been as much as where we are going."



"The cow mooed, the pig oinked, the chicken clucked, I baaed and then we adjourned."

To do this, a board chair must frame the "story" of the board work, and facilitate meetings accordingly. This happens well before any board meeting begins. Board chairs rely on support from the CEO or lead staff to plan meeting agendas, and work on framing the issues and discussion in a way that fosters clarity and thoughtful decision-making.

To do this, board chairs create the space where everyone has a voice—and everyone's voice is heard.

During meetings, board chairs must make sure everyone has a chance to voice their opinions. "On our board, some members talk more, and some don't talk much," says Sweeney McShane. "We value everyone's contribution, however not everyone is ready to put their voice and value into the mix. Sometimes it's the role of the board chair to encourage individuals to bring their thoughts and values forward. Because we do a lot of our meetings by phone, I make it a habit to ask quieter members their opinion on important issues."

Susan Packard Orr agrees. "Chairing a family foundation is different than chairing other boards. You have to be sensitive to family members, and make sure to include them. Having said that, board chairs should remember that they aren't in charge of anything. It's more of a facilitator role than a being-in-charge role."

According to David Orr, "In the board room, I treat family members the same as I do general (nonfamily) trustees. The board should hear all voices equally. The older, more experienced trustees raise their voices and share their opinions openly. Yet, some of the family members in the room are younger. I'm more likely to have a quiet check-in with these family members to see how they are doing. The general trustees don't have a family dynamic, and don't need special handling as do some family members."

Additionally, a good facilitator keeps the time and agenda on track.

Mary Mountcastle says she never trained to be a board chair, but she did take a few facilitation trainings and watched many board meetings, which helped her in her role.

"Some people have a hard time in the role of board chair. They have to come up with a good agenda, keep the meeting moving appropriately, and not get derailed by side conversations. There's always that person on the board who wants to beat the horse to death. The board chair's role is to figure out when the topic has been discussed long enough, and move the meeting along so it doesn't get stuck."

"Keep things on time, see that everyone has a chance to speak, politely cut them off if they are speaking too much, and invite them in if someone isn't speaking enough. These are typical parts of the job, but they are important," says Mountcastle.

Tip: A well-designed agenda can go a long way toward efficient and meaningful board meetings. It helps to notate agenda items that are for discussion only, and those that require a decision.
For sample meeting agendas and more on how to craft good meetings, see NCFP's Knowledge Center.

4. Check your ego at the door.

Good facilitators are neutral facilitators. Yet, how does a board chair remain neutral in a room full of parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins, who share close relationships and history?

It requires placing the board above ego and self-interest, says Noa Staryk of the McKnight Foundation in Minneapolis. "When I was chair, I appreciated the clarity of having my interests on the back burner. I liked the feeling of working for the board—focusing on the board's health overall and what our board needed to do their best job, versus showing up as myself the individual board member. I was able to help the staff understand where the board was coming from and how best to frame the conversation. It helped that I knew everyone so well."

"I had never chaired anything before, and through the experience, I came to think of the board chair role as an advocate for the board and a conduit for the staff. I learned that and loved that about being board chair," says Staryk.

Eliza K. T. Quigley, president and board chair of the Harris & Eliza Kempner Fund, says that having a degree in social work comes in handy for facilitating her board. "If I want people to know I hear them, I have to put my personal opinions aside. The board is not about me—it's an 'us' thing. Sometimes I have to let people rant and rave, and keep my cool. I say things like 'let's talk about some solutions,' and 'what I hear you saying is…' I'm also not afraid to say 'what do you think? I need your help.'"

Of course, it's not always easy for board chairs to put personal interests and opinions to the side, despite their role as facilitator. Mary Mountcastle has a solution for that: "If you have an opinion you want to share, you say 'I'm going to step out of my board chair role for a minute.' I always try to be diligent about that. Although, honestly, I don't enjoy being board chair as much—because I do like to express my opinion!"

Susan Packard Orr indicates it's a delicate balance. "I've tried to be careful about listening to everyone and making sure they have a chance to say what they want to—and to not insert my own opinion in a way that would override or shut down the conversation around the table."

"The board chair role is an advocate for the board and a conduit for the staff."

– Noa Staryk, McKnight Foundation

5. Follow up, express appreciation, and let ideas unfold.

"I'll come and go as chair, but in terms of a legacy, I want to do whatever I can to help build board trust/relationships and encourage a spirit of collaboration," says Debby Landesman, nonfamily board chair of the McKnight Foundation. "What's most important to me is continuing to build and support a cohesive board culture."

After every board meeting, Landesman follows up with her fellow board members to let them know they've been heard. "I try to show appreciation for how much time people are giving to the foundation, and follow up to ask: how did you feel it went?"

It's that intentional communication—the "*thanks for your thoughts on this*," and "*that was a great conversation*"—that can make all the difference, she says, in relationships and in board performance.

"Being a family foundation board chair comes with great responsibilities—financial oversight, governance, making sure to do a performance review for the CEO—all of those are critical to the role," says Landesman. "Yet the special sauce of a successful board chair is paying attention and expressing appreciation."

The board chair has another often unspoken post-meeting function: to take a pulse on ideas that arose, and communicate a clear direction to the CEO/executive staff.

How many times have you been at a board meeting where board members make comments that send the staff scurrying in an unanticipated direction?

It's the board chair's role to manage how board member thoughts translate into action. In other words, as a board chair, you don't want to let comments take on more meaning than they should, before vetting them with everyone on the board.

One way to do this is to circle back with the board member who had the brilliant idea, and ask: 'How serious are you about that idea? Do you think it represents the board's mindset as a whole? Are you sure you want the staff to pursue it, and what level of time/resources/effort will that require?'"

"I believe in letting things unfold, and that requires patience on the part of the board chair," says Robin Snidow, board chair of the General Service Foundation. "We get together as a board two times a year, and board members are scattered from LA to Vermont. There's no talking around a water cooler," she says. "Sometimes people come to board meetings real hot about something, and by the time the next meeting comes along, they've forgotten all about it."

As a board chair, it's important to listen to what arises, revisit it, sleep on it and let things unfold. "I say 'that's a great idea, let's revisit that next time,' or 'let's have a call about that in a month.' I can see so many decisions we could have made on a whim that wouldn't be relevant now."

6. Assess board performance on a regular basis.

An invaluable role of the board chair is to continually assess what's working well, and what isn't. A way to do this is through regular board performance reviews—both for the board overall, and for individual members. Board assessments are an opportunity for board members to be open and honest with each other in a constructive way.

Some family foundations shy away from board performance assessments, particularly if it means a board chair must evaluate his or her own family members. "It's not always comfortable to critique a cousin or brother's board performance, and then we all show up the next day to Thanksgiving dinner," says one board chair.

It helps to establish a standing governance committee to oversee board member performance and overall effectiveness. Other foundations choose to hire outside consultants or firms to help. The committee or

"What's one of the best things a chair can do? Say thank you. Be generous. Show people they are appreciated, and you will inspire them to do more."

– Alice Buhl, Senior Consultant, Lansberg, Gersick & Associates, and NCFP Senior Fellow

consultant might conduct an anonymous survey, or hold one-on-one interviews with each board member, gathering their thoughts on board effectiveness and the performance of their peers. They would then offer that performance feedback individually and to the board as a whole.

For example, the McKnight Foundation assesses individual members every three years. This process is tied to board member renewal. “We gather anonymous feedback from each director on renewing board members, and our governance committee recommends whether that person should be invited to continue on the board,” says Debby Landesman, board chair of the McKnight Foundation. “The board chair meets with the renewing director to provide feedback and solicit thoughts on their board experience. These reviews are for all directors—family and nonfamily. This helps to equalize and contribute to board effectiveness.”

“It’s a great experience—and it can be somewhat stressful,” says board member Noa Staryk. “It’s not easy to hear what you need to work on. We praise the good things and call out the areas for improvement. In the end, everyone has come to value the process. It’s made us better board members. There’s more accountability, and more motivation to bring our best to the board.”

For more on board performance, see NCFP’s *The Pursuit of Excellence Board Self-Assessment Tool*, designed to help family foundations understand their current performance as they strive for greater effectiveness.

Ten Responsibilities of Foundation Board Chairs

A board chair maintains many of the same responsibilities as the full board:

1. **Be faithful to mission**—clarify donor intent, be passionate about the mission
2. **Guide the grantmaking strategy**—develop and follow a grantmaking strategy, put grantmaking policies and processes in place
3. **Map out the future**—engage in strategic planning, succession planning
4. **Stay focused on financial oversight and legal compliance**—oversee financial operations, comply with legal and regulatory requirements
5. **Build a board that is strong and engaged**—compose the board thoughtfully, set term limits and rotation policies, set expectations for board members, create opportunities for board education

Additionally, board chairs:

6. **Master the art of facilitating meetings**—develop an annual meeting schedule, plan agendas, lead and facilitate meetings, tame troublesome behavior, ensure careful minute taking
7. **Connect the dots between the board, committees, and task forces**—delegate, coordinate committee work, and avoid duplication
8. **Communicate with the public**—along with the CEO, represent the foundation as the lead spokesperson, and maintain the public trust
9. **Oversee administrative operations**—clarify roles and responsibilities between board and staff, hire and manage the chief executive, communicate regularly with the chief executive
10. **Assess performance**—evaluate the chief executive’s performance, assess the board’s performance, assess the foundation’s impact, report progress

You can find this full report on NCFP’s Knowledge Center. Search for “Ten Responsibilities of Foundation Board Chairs,” BoardSource and Council of Michigan Foundations, 2017.

IV. How Does a Board Chair Work with the CEO/Executive?

"The single most-important thing you can do as board chair is forge a strong relationship with the CEO/staff executive," says Ruth Cummings, who recently chaired the Nathan Cummings Foundation for a three-year term. "If it's a new relationship, make it a priority to build trust and set expectations."

Susan Packard Orr agrees. "In my early days, the CEO at the time, Cole Wilbur, was a wonderful mentor to me. When Carol Larson came into the CEO role, we worked closely together—being very open and honest with each other, and never second guessing the other person. That's how you build a good relationship.

"It's important to be careful in that relationship," she continues. "A board chair could go around the CEO and work directly with staff, not including the CEO. Or, a CEO could work with other board members, without including the chair. Both of those are bad behavior, and can make people angry," she says. "If the CEO and board chair don't get along, it's time for a change," she says.

Here are ideas for how you can strengthen your relationship as board chair/CEO, as shared by your family foundation colleagues:

Speak Early—and Often

"Trust and candor are critical to that relationship," says Mary Mountcastle. "As board chair, I don't want to feel like I'm being played, and that goes both ways. I try to have a conversation upfront with the lead staff—what's our working relationship going to be like? How often will we communicate, and in what ways? I would rather have too much information than less, and know about any issues sooner than later."

Will you, as board chair, speak with the CEO once a week, once every two weeks, once every month? In person, by phone, by video chat? How often will you email or text updates? These are all basic communication agreements that a new board chair and CEO can establish right away. Although it might seem trivial, these basic agreements are important for establishing the tone for the relationship.

For example, when Michelle Knapik came on as new president to the Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation, she worked with a third generation board chair who lived across the country. "We had a bicoastal relationship," she says. "I would call her in my early evenings, and we worked out a good rhythm where we talked almost every other week." Talking this frequently, she says, helped build a strong relationship, even from a geographical distance.

"Excuse me, did you say 'No comment'?"

Understand Your Role

Board chairs need to understand their role: they aren't there to micromanage the CEO or staff. "Board chairs must be clear that they aren't there to do the CEO's job, which is to hire staff and run the foundation, but rather to support the CEO—to be a sounding board. I always ask: What's keeping you, as CEO, up at night?" says Robin Snidow of the General Service Foundation.

"In my mind, the board chair needs to understand the board—as both traffic cop and facilitator. It's not your job to push the agenda of any one board member, but to be the go-between for board and staff. If the entire board is clear about something, your job is to carry that message to the lead staff, and be a facilitator between these two entities," says Mountcastle.

Evaluate the CEO/Executive

The board chair should do an annual performance review of the CEO/executive. This is an important part of the job, and it can be tricky, says Mountcastle.

When David Orr came on as new board chair for the David & Lucile Packard Foundation, one of his first tasks was to review long-time CEO Carol Larson "which felt like a funny thing to do as a brand new board chair," says Orr. "In practice, though, it was great because it gave me a good excuse to talk with many of the trustees and every senior staff member of the foundation. As a new chair, I was able to ask them questions, not only about Carol, but also about the foundation and where they saw its strengths and weaknesses. I learned a lot through that experience."

WHEN THE BOARD CHAIR IS MOM OR DAD: ADVICE FOR FAMILY STAFF EXECUTIVES

Dorothy Gardner became executive director of The Longbrake Family Foundation, located in Seattle, Washington, in July 2005. Her first board chair was her father, Bill Longbrake.

At first, Gardner says, it took some doing to get clear on roles and how to interact. "My dad and I could easily go from being in a personal family space to a professional conversation. There was a blurring of lines, and I found I couldn't relax around him and just be his daughter.

"At that time, my parents came to my house for dinner every Sunday. I give my dad props. He said to me: 'I don't want it to be a business conversation every time you come over our house," says Gardner.

There are a few steps they took to ease their interactions and work well together. Here is the advice Gardner shares for other family staff executives with a close family member as board chair.

CREATE A COMMUNICATION STRUCTURE

First, Gardner and her father created a formalized meeting structure to keep foundation business outside of family time. From then on, if Gardner wanted a meeting with her dad about the foundation, she would call his administrative assistant, and set up a meeting at her dad's office.

"I would send out an agenda for our meetings, instead of having any surprise conversations. Our system wasn't perfect; the foundation inevitably creeped into our personal conversation at times. Yet setting good healthy boundaries made things much clearer."

MITIGATE THE FAMILY POWER DYNAMICS

At her dad's encouragement, Gardner engaged a philanthropy coach so that she didn't rely on her father for all her learning. "I was handed this job five years before I expected it, and I wasn't ready," she admits. "I looked to my dad to teach me, and that was upsetting our power balance. In 2006, I hired a philanthropy coach to learn what I didn't know and build up my self confidence."

"It's hard when a family member is the expert. I was the student, and my dad was the teacher, and that made it difficult to fulfill our professional roles. We weren't equals," she says. "Over time, I gained expertise in philanthropy, and that gave him and my brothers the opportunity to see me as a professional."

For example, Gardner recalls going on a site visit with her dad. "He took a back seat and watched me do my job, and said he admired the way I conducted the meeting and the questions I asked," she says. "When he was in the role of having all the knowledge, I didn't have the space to see myself in that way."

continued on page 18

"At that point, my brothers still saw me as a twelve year old," she says. "Yet they needed to see me as an executive director for the foundation to be effective. My dad had an 'a-ha' moment around this—that my brothers needed to hear what I was saying and respect what I was sharing, and see me as more than their little sister."

At this time, she says, her brothers were building careers and starting families. They didn't have a lot of time or bandwidth for the foundation. "In order to engage my brothers more in the foundation—and for us siblings to get to know each others' working styles—we made a policy to change board chairs every six months. This way, each of my brothers could take a turn, and it was short enough so they didn't feel overwhelmed."

"Changing board chairs every six months is not for everyone, and definitely not something a family foundation should do long term," Gardner says. "Yet in the short term, it worked well for us. I'm the youngest of four children, and the last time I spent significant time with my brothers, now in their 40s, was when I was a pre-teen," she says. "We make assumptions about our family members. As a staff member of the foundation, it gave me a chance to get to know my siblings in a new way. I was able to better understand their working styles, how they receive information, and how they communicate."

"When I'm one on one with my siblings, we can see each other as adults. Yet in full family dynamics, it's too easy to fall back into roles. We're working on that. We have to call each other out on it in kind ways," she says.

FIND SUPPORT FROM YOUR FAMILY STAFF PEERS AT OTHER FOUNDATIONS

Peer support is key for family staff, says Gardner. "You need an outlet outside the family."

Support for Gardner came from two second-generation family staff members she met at a conference. Similar to Gardner, both were daughters of the founder, and both had brothers running the foundation board. "We immediately bonded, and committed to have a monthly call for three years. They weren't in my region, and I could talk about grantee issues knowing I wasn't harming grantees. I could vent about family dynamics and ask for advice. We coached each other over time, and formed a lasting friendship."

"As a family staff, you deal with family all the time. It can feel isolating," she says. Talking with peers gives you a safe space, a sounding board, to process with other people who get what you are going through. It's important to have others outside the family who will listen and encourage you over time."

Listen and Learn from Each Other

As a new executive, Michelle Knapik of the Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation went on a listening tour. "When I started in my role as staff president, I visited each board member in person. During our first board meeting together, I shared a short presentation to raise up some of the through lines," she says.

Listening occurs on many levels, and there is a special communication with the board chair. "In a lead staff role, you have to know the perspective of your board chair and how much time they have—where they like to be involved, and how they like information delivered to them. If you communicate about this upfront, you are more likely to have a productive relationship," she says. For example, her immediate past chair was a third generation family member, who worked close to the foundation offices, and yet was busy with his career and young kids. The best time for them to meet was early morning, so she would stop by his office on the way to the foundation office. "I knew he doesn't have time to read a five-page update memo. We would sit face to face and go through my bulleted list. As staff, I want to accommodate my board chair's needs and hold productive and creative time and space for each other."

Pre-board meetings are another prime time for CEO/Board chair listening and learning. Honesty is important, she says, especially when you need to ask for help. "If I have asked my chair to guide a sensitive board conversation, we need to be on same page—and we need to understand when I might jump in with supportive details or framing so that, together, we have a unified front that doesn't inadvertently derail a process."

Colleague Story: SETTING BOUNDARIES AND BUILDING TRUST IN FAMILY CEO/BOARD CHAIR RELATIONSHIPS

At the Moniker Foundation in Colorado Springs, Colorado, Katy Rees serves as foundation staff leadership, and her mom is the board chair.

Rees' grandmother Bee Sinton founded The Moniker Foundation in 1998, and still serves on the board today. "We now have four generations of family members involved in the foundation, with ten family members on the board," says Rees.

Rees has a good working relationship with her mom as board chair. "At first, it was a challenge how to separate the mother-daughter relationship from the foundation business. It required both of us to understand boundaries, personal agendas, and that we each have our own schedule and working style," she says.

"We created a strong structure for how and when we communicate and meet, and how I support her and vice versa. I support her with meeting agendas and with strategic planning. My mom is also the CFO, and a lot of what she does is make sure our investments align with our mission and our net assets continue to grow."

In addition to serving as foundation leadership (in the role of executive director), Rees also is secretary and treasurer of the board. "I manage all the budgets on a monthly basis, and my mom and I meet monthly to review the finances."

"Having a structure in place for when we meet minimizes how often we pester each other," Rees says. It also keeps the foundation on mission.

"It can be challenging, with family members, to stay in alignment with the foundation's mission," she says. "We have to understand boundaries, and balance personal agendas with serving Moniker's mission. It happens quite a lot that a family member gets excited about something, and says 'Moniker could do this!' At some point we have to pause and ask: 'yes, but does it align with Moniker's mission?' It's tough because we want family members to be involved and proactive, and yet, we have to draw the line."

Additionally, understanding generational views—from the oldest to the youngest—has been a challenge for Rees. "The way I want to give is so different from how and why the older generations give. There's no one size fits all. What works well is when I vary my style of communication based on which board member I'm talking with," she says.

Trust in critical when it comes to board and family staff, she says. "As a board chair, my mom and the other family board members trust me and the staff members (Rees' husband and cousin)," she says. "The board sets the direction, and lets the staff take hold—which is how it should be. Their trust in me helps me move the mission forward."

A BOARD CHAIR'S LEGAL RESPONSIBILITIES

The board chair maintains the same legal responsibilities as the board itself:

- **Duty of care:** Board members are expected to actively participate in organizational planning and decision-making and to make sound and informed judgments.
- **Duty of loyalty:** When acting on behalf of the organization, board members must put the interests of the nonprofit before any personal or professional concerns and avoid potential conflicts of interest.
- **Duty of obedience:** Board members must ensure that the organization complies with all applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations, and that it remains committed to its established mission.

A foundation should also consult applicable state law and its own governing documents (articles of incorporation, trust instrument, bylaws, etc.) for any specific roles and responsibilities assigned to the board chair.

As part of its legal responsibilities, the board maintains oversight of the foundation's finances.

continued on page 20

Board members must evaluate financial policies, approve annual budgets, and review periodic financial reports to ensure the foundation has resources to carry out its mission. The board must also comply with federal and state regulations.

An important note for board chairs: Be mindful of ways to engage the full board and always keep the full board informed when it comes to legal responsibilities and finances. The specific role of the board and board chair is not static, but can shift depending on the activities and issues facing the foundation. Sometimes the work of the board chair is fairly passive, while at other times the board chair may exert significant control over a foundation.

Although the board can delegate certain roles and responsibilities to the board chair, a board committee or others, the board retains ultimate legal responsibility for the governance and management of a foundation. It is important to remind board members that they each have fiduciary duties that cannot be delegated. "Nonprofit and foundation scandals, especially involving compensation, sometimes relate to board chairs negotiating with incoming presidents/executives without proper authorization and without keeping the full board involved," says Andras Kosaras of the law firm Arnold & Porter. "That can lead to an increased personal liability for board chairs."

Colleague Story:
BUILDING A NEW RELATIONSHIP IN TIMES OF LEADERSHIP TRANSITION

After going through a search process for a new executive director, Robin Snidow, board chair of the General Service Foundation (GSF), "had a lot of skin in the game," she says. The year prior, the foundation's executive director of 20 years unexpectedly passed away, leaving the board, staff, and everyone who knew her in shock.

After more than a year, the foundation hired Dimple Abichandani as GSF's new executive director. "Our board and staff had been through so much. We couldn't handle another leadership change, and I was determined not to fail at the search process," says Snidow.

"As board chair, I viewed it as my job to make sure our new executive director was happy," says Snidow. "I believed she was the right person, and I knew there would be change and growing pains. Yet I felt it was my job to have her back—to help her navigate what she needed to do, and to have the hard conversations. Right away, I said to her 'nothing is off-limits—you can call me about anything.'"

Board chairs and staff executives have to build the muscle of their relationship, she says, and to do that, you need to practice talking about everything. "Dimple didn't know our board or our culture very well. In the beginning, we talked many times a week—about our kids, what was going on in our lives, as well as the work of the foundation. We made a real effort to get to know each other, and I helped her navigate through some challenging situations that are common to transitions. Today, I feel so lucky that we have a fantastic partnership in leading the foundation," says Snidow.

On a more serious note, Snidow shares this word of caution: "I don't think most board chairs realize: legally, the ultimate responsibility is on you," she says. "If things are going beautifully, it's not a big deal. Yet as soon as you have an executive director leave for any reason, or if you have a financial audit, or a staff member sues the foundation, it's on you. As board chair, you need to understand your legal duties and responsibilities, and have answers or know where to get them."

V. How Does a Board Chair Deal with Family Disruption?

In family foundations—as well as almost every organization and group of humans that exists—conflicts come up. What's a board chair's role in mitigating those conflicts or dealing with disruptive behavior, especially when it relates to family dynamics?

According to Ruth Cummings, former chair of the Nathan Cummings Foundation, "To serve in a family foundation, we have to call upon our best selves and, as a board, agree on the behavior we aspire to. We want to believe that everyone's actions are with the best of the foundation in mind, and remember that the foundation will outlast the behavior or certain individuals. Yet if the disruptive behavior is taking up a lot of the psychic air space, it's up to the board chair to say 'this is inappropriate' when needed, and remind the board what they are there to achieve."

Often, a board chair will initiate this conversation with the individual, in person or by phone outside the boardroom. As a board chair in this situation, you might start out by saying "I need to have an awkward conversation with you."

"And I'm sure no one will mind if we fold a few clothes while we talk."

It helps, says Susan Packard Orr of the David & Lucile Packard Foundation, to rise above assumptions. "You can't ascribe motives to other people, or assume you know why someone did what they did or said what they said. We all have to stop ourselves and say, 'well, I don't know,' and only then can you have a real conversation."

> "It's not the board chair's job to unpack the family baggage, but to know how to work with it, and at times, work around it."
>
> *– Eliza Quigley, Harris & Eliza Kempner Foundation*

No matter how skilled a board chair, when confronted with a delicate family situation, it's hard to maintain a neutral unbiased position. "When you have a challenging personality, as boards often do, it makes it more difficult if that person is a family member," says Mary Mountcastle. "As chair, I try to treat the person as I would anyone on the board, without cutting them more or less slack."

If there's one thing that gets in the way of a healthy board, it's sidebar conversations, she says. Sometimes called *parking lot conversations* (or, in plain terms, gossip), sidebar conversations are those that occur outside of board meetings between two or more members, typically about someone or something that happened in the meeting or on the board.

"I try to bring the difficult situations into the room, or better yet, assign a board committee to handle it." For example, a committee can talk individually to different people, so that people feel like their views are being represented. "Often there are different sets of facts and people with different viewpoints. The committee can gather all the opinions, and come forward with a recommendation for the entire board. That way, the board doesn't have to sink its time into something that might not easily get resolved," Mountcastle says.

This was the case for Susan Packard Orr, who recalls a situation early on in her role as chair when the board had a difficult time with a family member. "It was a conflict within the family, and our outside trustees stepped in and spoke with the family member outside the boardroom. It's hard within a family to resolve these issues; we come with baggage. Our CEO worked with individual family members behind the scenes, and we resolved it by splitting the foundation. Since that time, we've had very few issues. My sisters and I saw how disruptive that experience was, and determined not to go through that again. We've modeled that behavior in the boardroom for the next generation."

A nuanced part of board leadership is when a board chair can help the board see its patterns over time, says Michelle Knapik. "Board chairs have to be able to see the family dynamics that are transferred onto the foundation, and tease through them, which can at times feel like an impossible task. What board chairs can do is try to take their own preferences and triggers out of the equation."

This takes an incredible amount of self-awareness, she says. "Without self-awareness about their own triggers within the context of family dynamics, a chair or anyone in perceived power might react in a way that shuts down conversations quickly. When this happens, board members can lose the value of hearing differing perspectives, and this runs the risk of contaminating the organizational culture—sometimes for years, where it doesn't feel safe to bring a new perspective into the space."

"It's important for a board chair to remember—and model—that everyone has something to bring to the table, even those who come across as a little rough," says Eliza Quigley of the Harris & Eliza Kempner Foundation. "With families, they bring their skills and passion as much as they bring their baggage. It's not the board chair's job to unpack that baggage, but to know how to work within it, or at times, work around it," says Quigley.

For more information on dealing with disruption, visit NCFP's Knowledge Center to download the *Passages* *Avoiding Avoidance: Managing Conflict in Family Philanthropy*, NCFP, 2015.

"As president and board chair, I have to be much more conscientious about what I do and say publicly. I have nonprofit board experience, but it's a different job when it's family."

– Eliza K.T. Quigley, Harris & Eliza Kempner Foundation

Colleague Story:

CARRYING THE FAMILY LIGHT FORWARD

Eliza Quigley, a fifth generation family member, was in college at Boston University when she got a phone call from her mom. “She said: ‘Now listen, you’re going to get a phone call and they’re going to ask you to serve… and it’s important to me that you do’ and I thought, ‘Serve? Serve what?’”

Her great Aunt Noni Thompson had set up an advisory board for the younger generation family members to connect with the foundation, which was founded by Quigley’s great grandparents Harris and Eliza Kempner in 1946. “The board called it the ‘younger cousins’ group. That’s how I got to know so many of my cousins who lived outside of Galveston, Texas [the foundation’s geographic focus].” Quigley spent the next several years making small grants with her cousins, attending conferences, learning about philanthropy, and watching her family members in their roles as trustees.

The board elected her president and chair in 2018, and she is, as she describes it, the youngest female to be in the position. “I grew up in Galveston, and even though I left for 20 years, it’s a huge honor and responsibility to be back here, in what it means to our family and community. We don’t give multi-million dollar grants like some other foundations, but our gifts are impactful in this area.”

Two weeks into Quigley’s term as president and board chair, she had quite a surprise: the foundation’s executive director told her she was moving and would be leaving the staff role. “It took the wind out of my sails,” Quigley admits. “My first major role was to convince the board that we needed a search committee to conduct a thorough interview and hiring process. In the past, they had always done things in an old school way. I realized we didn’t have an up-to-date employee handbook, policies and procedures, or an annual performance review. We are small, but I knew we needed all these things in place to help us run smoothly and effectively.”

To date, she has created a governance committee and a consent agenda, and is also moving the foundation to a paperless system. “My cousins joke, ‘Eliza’s bringing us into the 21st century,’” she says.

Working with uncles and family members who are three times her age has its awkward moments, she says. “I had a few times in the beginning where I’d confer with my cousins and say ‘how do I handle this situation?’ They said ‘you know what? You are in charge. You wouldn’t be in that position if the board didn’t trust you.”

“I value the long-time board members, now in their 70s and 80s, and I want their historical input. Yet sometimes I have to remind myself—and them: ‘I am the board president and chair, and I do what know what I’m doing. Please come to me directly rather than go around me,’” she says.

In her role as board chair, Quigley thinks often of her mom, who passed away in 2017. Lyda Ann Thomas, who was the mayor of Galveston during Hurricanes Rita and Ike, was the family matriarch of her generation, serving as board chair for decades.

“My mom could get things done, and yet be really diplomatic about it. She would call board members directly and ask for what she wanted, in her southern gentile way,” reminisces Quigley. “She would tell me: ‘you can’t please everyone. Someone will always get mad.’ She had a way of finding what was best for the majority, and insightfully reminding the family what this foundation is all about.”

“She had a lifetime appointment to this board. We don’t have those anymore,” she says. Because of that, a challenge the board will face in the future is who will succeed Quigley as the next board chair. “We have an unwritten understanding that the board chair will be local to Galveston. We need boots on the ground. Yet we’re running out of family members here who can serve. A cousin can fly in once a quarter, but it’s not the same.”

Personally, she says, the place-based family foundation helped her connect with her Jewish roots in a way she didn’t expect. “Being a founding family of Galveston and Texas—and being a Jew in Texas—carries with it a history and legacy that I’ve come to deeply admire. When my great grandmother came to Texas, it was a great time of Jewish assimilation and interfaith marriage, and the Jewish side of our family almost skipped entire generations. I didn’t even know I was Jewish and what that meant until I was in college. I’ve discovered this huge heritage that I’m now able to carry on.”

“In a spiritual way, this is the family I was born into—now what do I do with it?” she sometimes asks herself. “I see my foundation role as one that carries my mom’s light forward. But I’m still learning.”

VI. In Sum: Top 8 Qualities of Successful Family Foundation Board Chairs

Beyond your roles and responsibilities as board chair, there are certain qualities that can make for a more successful—and enjoyable—experience. Here is a summary of what your family foundation colleagues say are the most important attributes of family foundation board chairs.

1. **Believe that everyone brings something that is valuable.** Everyone has something important to offer, and it's up to the board chair to recognize and encourage people to speak up and share.
2. **Own the ability to listen to—and lift up—other points of view.** As board chair, you may give up the ability to push your own point of view for the good of the group. Listen to others, and make sure they feel heard.

3. **Be willing to act on principle and uphold the foundation's values.** A board chair must be able to call out: "Are we acting in a way that is consistent with our family or foundation values?" This means being willing to admit mistakes and holding firm to "no, it cannot be done that way" when needed.
4. **Communicate intentionally. Board chairs cannot assume everyone knows everything.** Communicating thoughtfully and intentionally manages expectations, creates the space for honest dialogue, and helps individual board members show up as their best selves.
5. **Frame the issues and move the group to decisions.** Nothing can derail a conversation faster than when it's not framed correctly. While the chief executive frames program and strategic issues for the board, the board chair must frame issues related to family and governance. It helps to distinguish between "discussion" and "decision needed" and facilitate the conversation accordingly.
6. **Look at and think "big picture."** A chair must be able to look at the larger implications without getting caught in the day-to-day minutia. Keep your eye on the big picture—where the foundation has been, and where it is heading.
7. **Make time for board education and reflection.** Rise above the things that bog the board down. Offer opportunities and ideas for board member development and learning. At the start and end of every meeting, take time to set intentions, and reflect on what went well and how to move forward.
8. **Make it fun.** Even when it's hard work, serving as board chair for a family foundation is a privilege and a joy, say your colleagues. Remember to enjoy it—and inspire your fellow board members to enjoy it too.

"As board chair, I always think: How can we make this fun? Even in the business of board work, we need to remember that this is joyful and inspiring."

—Kelly Sweeney McShane, The William J. and Dorothy K. O'Neill Foundation

Resources to Learn More

Family Foundation Board Chair Roles and Responsibilities. Curated list on NCFP's Knowledge Center includes resources, webinars, and sample board chair descriptions.

Chait, Richard P., Ryan, William, and Taylor, Barbara. Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards. Wiley, 2004.

Getting Started with CEO Performance Review, NCFP, 2012 or download the past webinar *Performance Review: Evaluating the Family Foundation CEO*, NCFP, 2012

Ten Essential Responsibilities of Foundation Board Chairs. Board Source, 2017. (You can find this as a free sample in NCFP's Knowledge Center.)

Ten Great Board Chair Practices. CompassPoint, 2016.

About the Author

Elaine Gast Fawcett of PhilanthropyCommunications.com is a philanthropy writer and communications consultant who has been telling people's stories since fifth grade. For nearly 20 years, she has worked to strengthen the philanthropic sector sharing stories, tools, and practices that move family philanthropy forward. Elaine has interviewed 1000+ philanthropists, entrepreneurs and nonprofit leaders, and published a number of books, toolkits, articles and reports for foundations, nonprofits and grantmaker associations—including NCFP. Elaine lives in Northern California (Walnut Creek) with her husband and three young girls.

About the National Center for Family Philanthropy

The National Center for Family Philanthropy (NCFP) is the only national nonprofit dedicated exclusively to families who give and those who work with them. We provide the resources, expertise and support families need to transform their values into effective giving that makes a lasting impact on the communities they serve. Together, we make great things happen.

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