

## The Board/Executive Director Partnership

The partnership between the board and executive director is one of the most critical aspects of nonprofit leadership. While the board has the authority to define the mission and set direction for programmatic efforts, the executive director is usually authorized to manage operations. The two parties need each other and must, for the good of the organization and its mission, find a way to work productively together. This relationship is not stagnant; it will change, and the responsibilities assigned to the executive director will be prioritized differently from time to time.

The relationship between a board and the executive director varies based on the organization. In some cases, the relationship is fluid (or even haphazard), while in others it is carefully structured. A relationship that has a defined process for communication promises to be more productive. Up-front clarity, understanding, and agreement will forge a strong partnership between the board and executive director, which in turn benefits the entire organization.

### **Requirements for an effective partnership include:**

- Clarity of roles
- Division of responsibilities
- Attention to working relationships

It is important to note that the chair of the board typically works the most directly with the executive director and these two individuals must take care to ensure they develop their own partnership.

These two individuals share responsibilities, in particular, for establishing board meeting agendas and representing the organization in the community. It is important that these two individuals keep the aforementioned requirements for an effective partnership in mind

## Division of Responsibilities

### **The Board**

Authorized by the government and the organization's supporters, the board governs the life of the organization. The board's responsibilities include establishing strategic direction, ensuring resources, and providing oversight.

### **The Executive Director**

Authorized by the board, the executive director (sometimes called the chief executive) manages the daily affairs of the organization. The executive director:

- Manages the affairs of the organization by ensuring appropriate planning, coordination, and implementation of the organization's programs to support the mission.
- Retains immediate operational responsibility and power.
- Develops a capable staff and orchestrates staff functions.
- Manages organizational resources.
- Represents the organization in the community.
- Identifies internal and external issues that will have an impact on the organization's strategic direction and accomplishments.
- Assists the board in its governance functions by providing strategic information and guidance.

### **The board takes the lead, for example, when it:**

- Articulates the guiding values of the organization through policies that put the organization's mission into action;
- Hires, supports, and evaluates the executive director;
- Opens the doors to fundraising in the community;
- Monitors fiscal management, approves the annual budget, and assures that there is an annual audit; and
- Selects, recruits, and orients new board members.

### **The executive director takes the lead when he or she :**

Develops and proposes policy questions for the board's consideration;

- Hires, supervises, and motivates staff; and
- Develops and implements programs.

**The board, board chair, executive director, and staff share the lead when they:**

- Create a fundraising plan and strategy;
- Initiate and implement periodic program evaluation and review;
- Develop a strategic plan
- Prepare for board meetings

**The board chair and executive director share the lead when they**

- Establish board meeting agendas; and
- Represent the organization in the community

## The Leadership Role of the Board Chair

As the chief volunteer officer, the board chair is responsible for leading the board. This position demands exceptional commitment to the organization, first-rate leadership qualities, and personal integrity. The chair must earn the respect of fellow board members to be able to meet the challenges of this position.

### Leader of the board

To function effectively, groups need a leader. A board leader is approachable and available. He or she is objective and listens actively. He or she needs to be a strategist, knowledgeable about the organization and board practices, a coach, and a conciliator. Finally, he or she must be respected in the community. The chair most commonly performs the following functions:

- Serves as the contact point for every board member on board issues.
- Sets goals and objectives for the board and ensures that they are met.
- Ensures that all board members are involved in committee activities;
- Assigns committee chairs.
- Motivates board members to attend meetings.

### Facilitator of board meetings

One of the trickiest responsibilities of a chair is to run effective and productive board meetings. Effective meeting facilitators must be able to:

- Create a purposeful agenda in collaboration with the executive director and follow it.
- Know how to run a less formal and productive meeting.
- Engage each board member in deliberation.
- Control dominating or out-of-line behavior during meetings.

If the board chair is not able to lead an effective meeting, it is better to delegate that task to someone else (like the vice-chair) rather than risk unproductive or boring meetings. Meeting facilitation should not be delegated to the executive director or other staff.

### Should the chair vote?

The chair has the same right to vote as other board members. Some chairs vote, while others abstain and vote only to break a tie.

### **Relationship with the executive director**

Both the chair and the executive director of the organization need to support, consult, and complement each other. Both have their own responsibilities — the executive director manages the operational activities and the chair leads the board. Both share power in their mutual pursuit to advance the mission of the organization. To make this happen, they need to communicate openly and regularly.

This partnership needs constant attention. Personalities change but the positions remain. Each partner needs to adapt to and cultivate the working relationship. One way to view these relationships is to think of the executive director as the gatekeeper for the staff and the chair as the gatekeeper for the rest of the board. This helps to prevent miscommunication and it allows both leaders to stay aware of each others' needs.

## Executive Director Performance Reviews

The board delegates the organizational management and administrative duties to the executive director. That conveys a lot of authority. However, the board does not abdicate itself from the overall responsibility of oversight and duty of securing the health of the organization. A capable executive director is an essential partner in this oversight. To ensure that the right person is running the organization assumes that regular performance reviews take place.

### Importance of regular performance evaluation

Properly administered executive director performance evaluation benefits the executive director, the board, and vicariously the entire organization.

#### *Executive director benefits*

- Constructive feedback is the best guide to show what works and where change is needed.
- Self-evaluation as part of the process forces the executive director to reconcile his or her own weaknesses and strengths — and then to improve them or to build on them.
- Clarifying expectations for the coming year outlines priorities.

#### *Board benefits*

- Supporting the executive director is one of the board's main duties — performance evaluation should validate this duty.
- The evaluation process enhances communication between the board and the executive director.
- Evaluation facilitates the board's oversight function.

#### *Organizational benefits*

- It is imperative to have a perfect fit between the organizational goals and an executive director whose role is to achieve them. Evaluation ensures that the right hands are guiding the organization in the right direction.

### Elements of a productive performance evaluation

Three key elements ensure that the performance evaluation is well structured: job description, expectations, and process. Like any evaluation, the practice is cyclical in

nature. Any outcomes must be incorporated into the next evaluation cycle to feed into future improvement efforts.

- The executive director needs a clear and unambiguous *job description*. It clarifies the primary duties and responsibilities of the position. Skills needed to carry out the duties define the competency of the person being hired for the position.
- Annual *expectations* identify the priorities and specific projected accomplishments for the coming year. They must be mutually agreed upon by the executive director and the board and they serve as the final device for assessing achievements or shortcomings.

Evaluation *process* must fit the organizational culture and enhance the working relationship between the board and the executive director. Implementation of performance evaluation starts with a decision to do it. Who is involved, what tools to use, how to communicate — the board and the executive director determine their preferred options in order to use the results as a building block for the future.

### **Who participates**

The full board must be familiar and feel comfortable with the evaluation results but the actual process may be handled by a committee, a task force, or the chair. A self-evaluation of the executive director is an integral part of the process. Other feedback may come from senior staff, funders, or other stakeholders if the board wants to use a 360° approach.

### **Timing of evaluation**

The evaluation may be conducted annually at the end of the fiscal year and/or there may be intermittent discussions as long as it is understood that constructive criticism is part of positive feedback and evaluation relates to previously set goals. Documentation of the discussions and agreements protect both the board and the executive director if disagreements or misinterpretations occur.

### **What is being evaluated?**

A comprehensive assessment looks at qualitative and quantitative factors that shape individual performance. Measurable indicators link goals to results. Also, the executive director's intangible qualities may have an invaluable impact on the success of the organization and these characteristics must also be calculated into the assessment. Some of the concrete areas that demand attention include:

- The executive director's success in meeting the overall goals,
- the strategic alignment with the board's directives and accomplishment of management objectives,
- programmatic and fundraising achievements,
- fiscal management, and
- relationship with the board, staff, and the community.

## **Process**

There are many examples of comprehensive and simple questionnaires available for board members to fill out. Naturally board members rely on the pre-determined objectives when forming their opinions on the accomplishments. Usually the board members' comments are compiled, tabulated, and shared with the executive director and they, with the executive director's self-assessment, provide the fodder for the following discussion. If the board seeks opinions from the outsiders, their comments are integrated into the feedback.

To prevent the process from becoming too cumbersome, each board and executive director should determine the most productive and comfortable approach that allows them to communicate openly to make the evaluation a tool for enhancing performance and recognizing accomplishments.



## Executive Director Succession Planning

One of the fundamental duties of the board is to ensure that the organization is well run. The board is responsible for finding and keeping the person most suitable to manage the organization. This task is not an isolated task. It is an essential part of succession planning — a proactive process to keep the management constantly aligned with the strategic framework of the organization. This is a process that the board should regularly discuss and update. Only then it is possible to create a positive succession culture that allows the board to react wisely and in a timely manner when it needs to support the present executive director or to choose the next leader.

### **What are the elements of succession planning?**

Succession planning is a process for ensuring that the most qualified person is always running the organization. Its aim is not necessarily to groom a successor or determine ahead of time who the next executive director should be. A good plan proposes guidelines and options for action when that action is necessary. The steps of the plan are activated when the present executive director leaves suddenly or when the leave is planned.

To stay on top of things, the board should continually and faithfully evaluate its own performance, the performance of the present executive director, and the success of the organization in fulfilling its mission. The results of these three assessments are the underpinning of successful succession planning. They provide the reasoning and direction of the plan. They help foster a healthy atmosphere in the organization and among the board members.

Specifically, a succession plan includes the following elements:

- An up-to-date job description for the executive director
- Clear annual performance expectations for the executive director
- Measurable indicators for the performance of the entire organization
- Determination at regular intervals whether the organization is going in the right direction and what the key qualities of the executive director should be
- Assumption that the executive director must be capable of taking the organization to its expected level of performance
- A process/plan for hiring a new executive director
- Options for managing the executive transition period
- Emergency measures for unexpected loss of the executive director

- Methods for keeping the board undivided and focused on the future

### **What are the benefits of succession planning?**

Every executive director leaves the organization sooner or later. This happens because of death, health reasons, reassessment of personal priorities, retirement, or the board decides that it is time for the executive director to go. By having a process in place to guide its actions, the board can avoid knee-jerk solutions or making quick-fix decisions. Being prepared allows the board to save time as it does not have to start by planning the plan. It can immediately focus on pre-evaluated options. It is costly to make wrong decisions when hiring a new executive director. By having a clear action plan, the board is able to eliminate unnecessary steps that do not fit the present situation. By maintaining succession planning as a part of its regular strategic approach, the board can reduce the human drama of a leadership transition. It is possible to approach the future with structure and direction.

### **Who should be involved in the process?**

The board is ultimately responsible for succession planning, keeping the plan up-to-date, and executing the plan. Naturally, it never is wise to proceed in isolation. Feedback from those affected by the final decision (staff, donors, other constituents) allows the board to stay on track and choose the right options as the plan is implemented. An exit interview with the leaving executive director can provide invaluable information. Relying on an outside consultant when assessing organizational performance can bring an unbiased view.

### **What are the main obstacles for successful planning?**

Probably the main stumbling block for a workable plan is to misunderstand its scope. Succession planning is not limited to hiring a new executive director or even planning for the executive transition. These are important components of the plan and therefore must be properly addressed. But to focus only on one segment of the process is ignoring the preparation that makes these steps successful. Succession planning is a continuous and cyclical process that only starts with the hiring of a new executive director and the development of an evaluation process with that new leader.