

Successful Boards and Presidents – Number II

November, 2006

This is the second in a series of publications on Board-CEO success. From time-to-time, the District Boards Association publishes materials on successful boards that support successful presidencies and vice versa.

While the following article was written for CEOs of voluntary associations and not-for-profit organizations, we hope you find that it has very valuable content for both district board members and our CEOs; college presidents. “Staying on Board” identifies five strategic areas of board-CEO relationships. There are likely others that you believe are important. Feel free to share them to continue the dialog or to include in a future installment in this series.

Staying On Board

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT, March 2005

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Rate your board relations skills. A panel of experts identifies the top five strategic areas that affect board success. Assess how well you stack up.

EDITED BY APRYL MOTLEY

Is your relationship with your board dynamic or dysfunctional? Are you a manager or a motivator? When was the last time you took an honest look at how well you relate to your board? If you're even a little unsure of the answers to these questions, it may be time to find out just how well your board barometer is working.

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT asked a small group of board relations experts to identify the top five strategic areas that affect the success of boards and to discuss how the CEO sets the tone for addressing these areas. Following is an overview of the areas on which they focused: vision, communication, training, roles and responsibilities, and performance and expectations. Some of these may be more or less critical to you than others, depending on how you rate your board relations skills.

Vision

Our group identified vision as the most important area that you should focus on in building a relationship with your board, particularly with your board chair.

Ideally, the CEO and the chair will begin their relationship with a clear understanding of how they will work together during the chief elected officer's term. "The CEO and the chair must be on the same page," says Marshall Brown, president of Marshall Brown and

Associates, Washington, D.C. "They might differ on how they turn the page, but they must have a similar vision for the organization." In her work with boards, Jean Block, president of Jean Block Consulting, Inc., Albuquerque, New Mexico, always recommends a face-to-face meeting between the CEO and chair early in the term, so that they can decide how they are going to operate in the year ahead.

Carter McNamara of Authenticity Consulting, Minneapolis, takes the concept of vision a step further when he suggests that "the CEO often has to take the lead and have a vision of what a good board would look like." He continues, "The first thing the CEO has to decide is that he or she wants a good board. When CEOs complain about boards, sometimes it's because they don't *want* to have a good board supervising their work." Clearly, a good relationship with your board begins in the spirit of partnership and a shared vision.

Communication

Even with a shared vision in place, without consistent and meaningful communication, you will find it difficult to build a positive relationship with your board. To be effective, your volunteers need information tailored to their roles as members of the board of directors. "To have a strong board, the chief executive has to do a lot of very hard work to keep board members informed and to maintain a two-way flow of information," says Theresa L. Garcia, CEO of Trust, Leadership, and Growth, LLC, Carefree, Arizona.

A portion of this work is understanding how your board members prefer to communicate. "A CEO would be smart to have an open dialogue with the chair about how he or she likes to communicate--whether by phone, e-mail, or in person," says Brown. Find out what kinds of information your chair and board members expect to receive and then determine the best way to provide it to them. Many organizations post board materials to dedicated areas of their Web sites so that their boards have easy access to any pertinent documents ranging from the strategic plan to the minutes from the last board meeting.

Training

Ask yourself: "How skilled is the board of directors in knowing its roles and responsibilities?" recommends Annette E. Petrick, CAE, president of Petrick Outsourcing Unlimited, Inc., Woodstock, Virginia. It's important not to assume that your volunteers know how to run an association. While they bring functional knowledge of your industry or profession and other valuable skills to the table, your board members still require training.

"It's our fault if we didn't give board members what they need to be successful," says Block. She believes that many errors of the "we just didn't know any better" variety can be avoided by providing board members with appropriate training.

Keep in mind that some veteran board members may feel that they do not need any additional training. But you should firmly suggest that they participate. "When I work with a board, I make sure that all the members know that we'll be having a one-hour refresher course--in addition to a separate orientation and training for new board

members--for *everyone* to review their roles and responsibilities," says McNamara. Although some veteran members may be initially resistant, most board members leave training energized and more confident about the work that lies ahead of them.

Roles and responsibilities

One of the key areas that you'll address during training is what's expected of each board member during his or her term. Dealing with the issue of "how well the board understands the veil between leadership responsibilities and staff responsibilities is critical," says Petrick. Many boards create and distribute job descriptions for the chief staff executive, the chair, and board members. "Giving everyone a job description is one of the best ways to avoid confusion about who does what," says Block.

Beyond understanding specific duties and functions, at the foundation of your relationship with your board, there must be trust. "Board members must feel that they are trusted, but they must also trust the CEO," says Garcia. "Mutual trust increases board effectiveness by allowing the board to fully focus on its role as organization steward and support you as the sole operational authority, accountable for staff, operational achievement, and conduct. To build trust, you must consistently demonstrate full trust in the board. You do this by fully disclosing all pertinent information, especially in controversial matters. Above all, your actions consistently demonstrate an unwavering pursuit of the mission."

Performance and expectations

Ultimately, the success of your board in the areas addressed earlier equates to the success of your organization. And you will be evaluated in part on how well you are able to work with your board to achieve the goals and mission of the organization. "If everyone on the board has bought into the strategic plan and agreed-upon goals, there shouldn't be any surprises at evaluation time," says Marshall Brown.

Make sure that you understand your board's expectations of you. You *and* your board should set goals and benchmarks that serve as the basis of your evaluation. However, in doing so, you also want to remain focused on the big picture. "The board and the CEO should feel good about what they've accomplished. When they look at the big picture, they often see how much they've really done together. It's important to have a sense of proportion," says McNamara.

Real-world experiences

How do these five areas play out in the real world of association management? We asked three CEOs to describe their relationships with their boards in these five strategic areas. What follows are their accounts.

(please see next page for first CEO account)

Making an Investment

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT, March 2005

By: *Dolan, Thomas C., CAE*

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT asked a small group of board relations experts to identify the top five strategic areas that affect the success of boards and to discuss how the CEO sets the tone for addressing these areas.

I see the relationship between the board and the CEO as a partnership. I am committed to investing time and resources in building our relationship. Here's my approach to working with my chair and the board as a whole.

Getting started. I make it a point to visit my chair-elect's place of work before his or her term as chair begins. This gives me the opportunity to interact with his or her colleagues and understand more about how we'll work together in the coming year. During my visit, we'll discuss his or her vision for the chairmanship.

Staying on track. Our organization is driven by our strategic plan. Our board members believe in the plan, and I believe in it. We review the strategic plan at every board meeting. It's my job to help my board realize its vision, as board, for the organization. We work together to create that vision, but primacy is with the board.

Remaining connected. I have a good feel for how my various board members like to communicate. They are fact-and data-driven people. The board packets for our meetings are tailored to meet these characteristics. For example, the annual budget submission to the board is designed so that the members have the appropriate information to approve it. The information that I need on a daily basis is different from what they may need. It's important that any communication be designed for the individual who is going to use it.

In addition to the information provided at meetings, board members receive a monthly packet via mail, and we also have a dedicated area of our Web site for volunteer leaders. The purpose of these communication vehicles is twofold: 1) to provide indicators of how the organization is doing and 2) to make sure board members are knowledgeable about a topic if approached by members. For example, during our recent governance changes, we provided board members with talking points so that they could easily communicate with members.

Learning together. I think that it's important to put the time and energy into training and orientation for board members. Each year we host a one-day training program for our four new governors. In addition, the four new board members and I will attend ASAE's CEO Symposium together.

Tracking our progress. Our overriding philosophy is that if you cannot measure it, then you cannot manage it. I am held accountable for corporate objectives, which are broken down by divisions in the organization. Each year, I prepare a communique for the chair to send the entire board that includes a summary of our progress on those objectives, a narrative from me reviewing the past year, and a questionnaire used to rate my performance. Every board member completes the questionnaire and sends his or her response to all three chairman officers (the chair, chair-elect, and immediate past chair). Then the chairman officers discuss the feedback from the board and prepare my evaluation. Following that, the chair will meet with me for a one-on-one evaluation and provide me with a summary of the board's feedback.

I am fortunate to work with a board that understands and is sensitive to the relationship between the board and the CEO. I've always considered this to be a partnership based on trust. So I don't ever surprise them. I have been pleased with the trust placed in me by my volunteer leaders.

[Thomas C. Dolan, CAE](#), is president and CEO of the American College of Healthcare Executives, Chicago. His board has 15 members, who serve three-year terms.

(please see next page for next CEO account)

Starting Fresh

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT, March 2005

By: *Deborah S. Hechinger*

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT asked a small group of board relations experts to identify the top five strategic areas that affect the success of boards and to discuss how the CEO sets the tone for addressing these areas.

I started work at BoardSource, Washington, D.C., in October 2003, so my relationship with my board is a new one. But we quickly established a working environment that is open and frank. I have a small, very experienced board that I can talk candidly with about the opportunities and challenges facing our organization. The following strategies inform the way we work together:

Partnering with the chair. My chair and I are both committed to the success of the organization. We know that our partnership is key to its growth. We speak several times a month and have candid conversations about what's working and what isn't. My chair provides her perspective on our objectives and also serves as a sounding board for me. I trust her and know that I can rely on her without hesitation.

Planning for the future. We've just spent the past year designing a new strategic plan for BoardSource. Our board members were very active in this process. Staff took the lead in identifying issues for consideration, and then the board had an open discussion about them. Working together, we were able to identify a set of strategies for the future and develop a business plan to help us achieve our goals.

Communicating with a purpose. I keep in touch with board members by phone or e-mail as often as I need to depending upon their responsibilities. We meet in person four times a year, and a significant amount of material is sent to board members for review in advance of the meeting. We customize the information for them, so they are able to concentrate on key issues. I think that it's important to give people time to digest information before you ask them to make decisions based upon it. Once board members have the information that they need, you can establish a framework for better discussion and decision making. If you want your board to do the work, you have to set it up that way.

Assessing the board's work. It's important for boards to assess their work. No matter how large or small a board is, a self-assessment offers a way for boards to understand their responsibilities, renew relationships among board members, identify problems, and agree on steps to improve performance. We have an online tool available for board members to actually rate themselves. Completing an assessment about every three years is a real opportunity to bring people together to address issues.

Evaluating our progress. When I was hired, my board told me that BoardSource's practice was to have the CEO develop goals, which would then be discussed and approved by the board. Because we've had plenty of opportunities to discuss BoardSource's strategies and plans, I look forward to our discussions and don't anticipate any surprises. That's just one of the benefits of the board being an active partner in the success of the organization and of an open and collaborative relationship between the board chair and the CEO.

Nonprofit organizations are often starved for resources. You cannot choose to ignore your board. If you do, it significantly impacts your ability to achieve your organization's mission. When you don't engage your board, you lose an important resource. You are better off if you recognize the resources that board members bring to the table and find ways to access them.

[Deborah S. Hechinger](#) is president and CEO of BoardSource, Washington, D.C. Her board currently has eight members, who serve a maximum of two three-year terms.

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Building the Future Together

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT, March 2005

By: *Cass Wheeler*

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT asked a small group of board relations experts to identify the top five strategic areas that affect the success of boards and to discuss how the CEO sets the tone for addressing these areas.

Volunteers are the backbone of this organization. We wouldn't be the organization that we are today without them. I enjoy working with all seven officers (president, president-elect, immediate past president, chair, chair-elect, immediate past chair, and secretary/treasurer) and our board to achieve our mission and goals. We work together in a highly collaborative environment that builds upon the initiatives we've put in place to help our board to be successful.

Working collaboratively. I try to work with the entire cabinet of officers as much as possible. We meet face-to-face four times a year and by teleconference eight times. In addition, I communicate with them regularly via phone and e-mail. In January, I meet with both the chairman-elect and the president-elect to plan for the fiscal year, which begins July 1. We also host an annual one-day spring retreat for the incoming officers and senior staff. During a portion of the retreat, we discuss the appointment of next year's committees and reach an agreement on our priorities in relation to our strategic plan. Through these interactions with the officers, I have gained sensitivity about when they want to be involved in a particular issue or when they want staff to handle it.

Focusing our efforts. In addition to my communication with officers as a group, I devote some time to discussing issues with the chairman (who is a business professional) and the president (who is a medical professional). We have a biweekly conference call to discuss a variety of topics. The main objective of the call is to ensure that they both know what's going on in the organization. I present items for discussion and then ask if they have any additional topics that they would like to discuss. It's very informal, and we take whatever time is needed to address these specific issues.

Preparing to serve. We hold two three-hour orientation sessions for new board members. The first session is held in conjunction with a leadership conference in April. The second session is held the day before their first board meeting in June. During their orientation, new board members learn about their fiduciary responsibilities, and we try to make sure that they have a clear understanding of our strategic plan. They also hear presentations about our five key functional areas of science and research, advocacy, resource generation, health care delivery, and external communication and marketing, as well as corporate operations. Whenever possible, these presentations are given by staff and volunteer pairs, who inform the new board members about issues in that particular

area for the past 12 months and what lies ahead during the next two to three years. We expect every new board member to attend orientation.

Using technology to communicate. We have a voice mail system for our board, staff, and affiliates. I record a weekly message every Monday that updates them about important issues identified by our internal communication director, including new programs or initiatives, successful fundraising events, and significant external events.

Our board is also comfortable with communicating electronically. In addition to three face-to-face meetings, the board meets three to four times via webconference or teleconference. We send them a bimonthly report via e-mail, which summarizes 25-30 key topics and provides them with e-mail links to the appropriate staff in the event that they have questions or need more information. They also receive our weekly e-mail newsletter with news on science and association initiatives. Our job as a staff is to make sure that board members have the information they need to stay informed so that they can drive the strategic decisions.

Setting goals. Each year I meet with the seven officers and identify measurable goals and objectives for the year. My goals generally fall into three main categories: revenue, strategy, and change. I try not to include more than two or three items per category. After I present my goals for review, the board signs off on them. When it is time to complete my evaluation, the officers use a scorecard and rate me on a scale of one to four in areas such as achievement of revenue, health initiatives, advocacy, diversity, and customer goals as previously determined. In addition, they answer several subjective questions to evaluate my performance in areas such as financial controls and staff and board development.

Building the team of the future. I think that having a smaller board, with 26 members instead of the 43 that we had three years ago, has allowed us to work more effectively. Our next step is to be even more strategically focused as a board. Ultimately, I approach my work with our board in the spirit of unity. We're in this together. We'll work toward common goals and share responsibility and accountability. We need each other to be successful.

[Cass Wheeler](#) is CEO of the American Heart Association, Dallas. His board has 26 directors.

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Submission of materials to be considered for publication in this series is very welcome.