



BOARD BRIEF: Board Chair and CEO Relationship

Board Briefs are "at-a-glance" resources that help board volunteers better support their Boys & Girls Club. They are designed to occur as five-minute education opportunities at board meetings.

SUMMARY

“Do you own the Boys & Girls Club?” asked a curious 6-year-old member of his Club’s CEO. The CEO replied, “No, I’m just in charge – *you* are one of the owners of this place,” and then watched the little guy walk away with his head held just a little higher. The question is important though. Who really “owns” the Club?

Certainly the corporation is the legal owner. The face of the Club, however, is the responsibility of at least two individuals: the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and the Board Chair.

A CRITICAL RELATIONSHIP

The CEO provides day-to-day leadership and the Board Chair is the leader of the governing board. If these two individuals are not leading together as a strong team then confusion (or chaos) will result, possibly damaging the Club’s image, and more alarming, decreasing the organization’s impact on youth served. A well-functioning Board Chair and CEO relationship will lead to strong leadership of the board. This relationship takes time to establish and intentional steps must be taken along the way to make it happen.

Establishing the Relationship

In the best of circumstances, the relationship between the Board Chair and the CEO begins well before a change occurs in either leadership role. The selection of a CEO is one of the most important tasks for a board. While the Board Chair may or may not be a part of the selection committee, it is of great importance that he or she be engaged with the final candidates so that a seamless transition may occur. A comfortable relationship with the Board Chair right from the start will give the new CEO a better chance for a good beginning – and may make the difference between success and failure.

Of course, the more frequent change occurs for the Board Chair position. This relationship between the Chair Elect and CEO should begin in advance of the installation ceremony. In fact, a well-crafted succession plan will include more than one person in line for the Board Chair role and will engage these individuals in the work of guiding the board. Examples include being a chairperson of a key committee (Resource Development, Finance, etc.), guiding the strategic plan process, or simply serving on the Executive Committee in advance of taking the reins. These shared experiences with the CEO will provide a good foundation for the relationship once the Board Chair is installed.

Once the Board Chair is in place a regular schedule of communication should be established. A good starting point is a meeting held to reach agreement about regular communications and the frequency of contact. This meeting is best held away from the Clubhouse to avoid distractions. In many cases, this is a practice continued as part of CEO and Board Chair's regular routine.

Frequent and Regular Communication

Once the leadership team is in place and has had initial contact, the key to success is frequent, regular communication regarding the issues facing the Club. There may be times when another board or staff member may attend to provide insights or information. For example, exemplary Club leaders include the incoming Board Chair in their meetings as the Board Chair's term is winding down. This allows for a seamless transition.

Strategic, Meaningful Contact

Meetings topics should be strategic in nature as much as possible (e.g., progress on the strategic plan, formation of a special committee, etc.). At times it will make sense to move into a more specific topic such as progress on an upcoming event, progress on a construction project, updates on resource development efforts, etc. The important aspect of these gatherings is that the organization's principal leaders are "on the same page," and using the same basic information.

Another aspect of a regular Board Chair/CEO meeting is the task of managing the board itself. While this is a primary role for the Board Chair, there are shared responsibilities and tasks between the two leaders. Some of the discussion points that may occur at every meeting are formulation of the agenda for an upcoming meeting, updating the cultivation and recruitment of new board members, and engagement with Boys & Girls Clubs of America.

Tug-of-War is a Playground Game

A strong relationship between the Board Chair and CEO is key to the success of any Boys & Girls Club organization. If disagreement does arise between the Board Chair and CEO, and it is not resolved, a struggle will begin that can become quite destructive. Tug-of-War is meant to be played on the playground, not in the boardroom, and especially not between two individuals trying to move their Club in one direction: forward! If such a dispute should arise, seek counsel from your DOD.