



4 Tips for a Strong CEO and Board Chair Partnership

By Cindi Phallen

Last month a CEO client confessed to me that he wasn't sharing some information with his board chair because he was nervous about how it would be received — red flag alert.

We all know it's super beneficial to have a strong, trusting relationship where both the CEO and board chair work in partnership to lead the organization.

And yet it remains one of the trickiest dynamics.

Maybe the CEO and management team are very talented and the board chair doesn't think they're really needed.

Maybe the CEO wants to keep the board at arm's length so it doesn't interfere with operations.

Maybe the weird power dynamic influences how they interact — the CEO is the expert in the field but the board, whose members rotate in and out, supervises them.

Maybe the benefits of working well together simply aren't understood.

Whatever the reason for this dilemma, let's focus on these four items to strengthen the partnership

1. Discuss why it matters. In order to get on the same page, you both need to agree that there are important benefits to the partnership. To name a few:

When there is mutual respect and trust, there is collaboration.

It's easier to be aligned around priorities and goals when you partner well.

Role clarity comes into focus and there's no need to worry about anyone overstepping.

Meetings run efficiently and effectively with a united front.

The rest of the board (and staff) tends to be more fully engaged as they rally around strong leadership.

Goals are achieved faster when you're on the same page.

Once you both understand why it's important to work well together, the next steps occur more easily.

2. Establish a vision for success and create the culture you want. Talk about the kind of partnership they envision — you have to be able to see it to achieve it. Discuss things like:

What will success look like when you're working well together:

What's getting done? How is it getting done?

Who will follow up with board members?

How might you enhance board meeting agendas?

How can you continue to build relationships between board members?

How/when will you communicate?

What is the culture you want to create? How will you incorporate the organization's values into your work and what behaviors support that culture?

There's a lot to talk about and it can be very inspiring to discuss what's possible!

3. Have a plan for when things go sideways. Not every day will be sunshine and rainbows. While it's important to be optimistic and forward thinking, sometimes things get off track.

According to the planning fallacy, we tend to underestimate time, costs and risks in our planning.

So plan in advance for how you will handle it when a committee isn't functioning according to plan. Or, when a board member is MIA. Or, when a major funding source dries up.

Others are counting on the CEO and board chair to lead well, especially during the hard times (flashback to 2020).

Being able to acknowledge and assess options is a real strength and problems can't be ignored or dealt with in secret.

And always, always express your gratitude for the other's leadership efforts. Things won't be perfect every day but their intentions are good and deserve recognition.

4. Conduct purposeful transition meetings. Hopefully you have a succession plan for your top leadership positions. When you do, you can easily set up the next board chair for success.

Months before they take office, have a conversation with both the outgoing and incoming chair, along with the CEO to learn from their experience. You might ask questions like:

What's been your key to success?

What surprises were there, if any?

How do you keep the board engaged?

What do you think the priorities should be for next year?

What are you most concerned about?

Who do you see as emerging leaders?

What do you appreciate most about your relationship with the CEO?

I can assure you the incoming chair will appreciate this time together!

Then have a series of conversations between just the CEO and incoming chair to better understand each other and build trust. Consider these questions:

What do you want your legacy to be?

What's your vision of success for our partnership? Roles? Culture?

How will we handle challenges when things get off track?

What do you need to be successful?

What are your communication preferences? Method? Frequency?

Every person is different and brings different talents and experiences to the table so being intentional, without assumptions, is required.

At the end of the day, a confident leader will ask what the other person expects from them and have an honest conversation to establish the foundation of a strong partnership.

Your staff, board members and community are counting on you to get this right. So commit and communicate.

<https://www.nonprofitpro.com/post/4-tips-for-strong-ceo-board-chair-partnership/>