

BOARD CHAIR PREP

Are you about to become your organization's board chair? Here are eight things you need to do now to prepare for this key role.

1. REVIEW THE JOB DESCRIPTION.

As the senior volunteer leader of the organization, the board chair is responsible for leading the board in the oversight and support responsibilities that are critical to good governance. The chair must be knowledgeable about the organization — its mission, vision, values, programs, services, constituents, and resources — and understand its place in the larger framework of the community and the still larger sphere of local and national peer organizations. The chair's role is usually defined in the bylaws, but a separate job description should outline the duties in more detail. *See sample on page 2.*

2. CARVE OUT TIME IN YOUR PERSONAL SCHEDULE.

As you undoubtedly know, being the board chair is a considerable time commitment. It should not consume your life, however. Be cognizant of how much time you can commit to the organization and then achieve and maintain a balance.

3. CONSIDER CREATING A TIMETABLE TO ORGANIZE THE TIME YOU DEVOTE TO THE POSITION.

Using a timetable will help you organize your time and manage the expected tasks and responsibilities. The timetable can be divided into monthly, quarterly, annual, and periodic tasks. Adding board meetings and other organizational events to the timetable will help you visualize the time commitment and its ebb and flow at various times of the year. The list of tasks need not be all-inclusive because it will change as the organization responds strategically to needs and opportunities.

4. MEET WITH THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OR CHIEF EXECUTIVE TO DISCUSS:

- Their expectations of the board chair and the working relationship, including professional boundaries.
- Vision for the organization
- Their personal goals as chief executive
- The status of the strategic plan or framework
- Current and evolving relationships in the community
- Trends affecting the organization
- Challenges and opportunities facing the organization
- Organization's financial health

5. MEET WITH THE FORMER BOARD CHAIR TO DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING:

- Time commitment
- Challenging issues that arose during their tenure
- Unfinished board business
- Their working relationship with the chief executive, board members, community leaders, donors, and other community stakeholders

6. REACH OUT TO EVERY BOARD MEMBER TO DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING:

- Why they joined the board
- How their board service is going
- What they are looking for in a chair

- Board meeting effectiveness — how could meetings be improved?
- Secure their support
- Thank them for their service

7. IF NECESSARY, STRENGTHEN YOUR COMMUNICATION AND MEETING FACILITATION SKILLS.

Strong communication skills are essential to the role of the board chair, who facilitates board meetings and represents the organization in different settings and situations. Some circumstances — such as board meetings — require the chair to create an atmosphere in which everyone is invited to share their opinions through facilitated discussion and dialogue. In other contexts — such as meetings with funders — you may be asked to represent the organization and communicate on its behalf. We often assume that anyone who becomes a board chair already is a good communicator, but that is not necessarily the case.

8. SET GOALS.

A good way to help you, and, in turn, the board set goals is to assess the board's current performance. By doing so, you will be able to identify the board's strengths and weaknesses and then set board development priorities and goals. It will help you determine where to focus your energies as you begin your tenure.

SAMPLE BOARD CHAIR JOB DESCRIPTION

The board chair is the senior volunteer leader of XYZ and presides at all meetings of the board, the executive committee, and other meetings as required.

Key Responsibilities

- **Policy and Planning:** Works with the chief executive and the board to establish the guiding principles, policies, and mission for the organization.
- **Budget and Finances:** Works with the appropriate board members and committees to oversee the budget of the organization and assumes ultimate responsibility for the integrity of its finances.
- **Board Meetings:** Leads and facilitates board meetings by making sure that the agenda is closely followed, every board member has the opportunity to participate in discussions, and the board uses proper decision-making procedures.
- **Board Committees:** Serves as an ex-officio member of all board committees and works to structure a committee system that contributes to the board's overall effectiveness.
- **Board Development:** Oversees efforts to build and maintain a strong board by setting goals and expectations for the board, cultivating leadership among individual board members, and working with the governance committee to make board development a priority.
- **Board Recruitment and Orientation:** Works with the governance committee to identify and recruit new board members who bring important skills, knowledge, and diversity to the board.
- **Board Evaluation:** Works to make sure the board has opportunities to reflect regularly on how well it is meeting its responsibilities to the organization — in part by overseeing a board self-assessment every two to three years.
- **Staff Oversight, Compensation, and Evaluation:** Oversees the hiring, evaluation, and compensation of the chief executive; and ensures the existence of a succession plan for the chief executive's position.
- **Fundraising:** Guides the work of the board to secure funds for the organization by overseeing the development of fundraising policies, encouraging and supporting the fundraising efforts of the development committee and individual board members, soliciting contributions from board members and selected outside contributors, and setting an example by contributing their own funds to the organization.
- **Public Relations, Communications, and Advocacy.** Speaks for the board in the event of a controversy or crisis; oversees the development of communications policies; and works to promote the work of the organization in conversations, speeches, interviews, and other day-to-day activities.