



# Partnership in a Time of Pandemic: The CEO and the Board

By Ann Cohen

In a time of crisis, and certainly we are in such a time, it's not on the chief executive to do it all. Today, it is imperative that we look to the partnership between the chief executive and the board. It is the community they form that must step up.

This isn't just good governance. It is how we do our work and practice our values. In *The Source*, a text designed to inspire nonprofit boards to operate at the highest and best use of their collective capacity, the first principle is having a constructive partnership between the board and the chief executive:

*Exceptional boards govern in constructive partnership with the chief executive, recognizing that the effectiveness of the board and chief executive are interdependent. The board is a powerful force supporting the organization, while the CEO sees the board as a strategic asset. [Emphasis added.]*

When a board hires a competent chief executive, it presumably has adopted the basics of role differentiation to support the mission of the organization where the chief executive and board each have a clearly delineated lane. But what happens when a seismic change occurs, and the chief executive must redefine what they do? How must they care for the employees, ensure their safety, apply for federal loans and grants that evolve in real time, stay on top of the virtual advice being offered, and lead with skills perhaps outside their knowledge base — all of which require decisions to be made without a board being able to convene.

While board and chief executive have pledged to “be in this together,” what does that mean now? How do they refine being that strategic asset now in support of the mission? Today, as the lanes are changing rapidly, boards must become allies with their chief executives. The life-and-death decisions that the chief executive and board must address for the staff, the organization, and the people they serve are decidedly different than when the chief executive was hired, or when board members were brought on. Today, everyone must be present, step up, and act to support the organization.

There are many critical ways to put this into action. Here are my top three, each grounded in fundamental values of good governance:

1. *Responsibility for Decision-Making: Taking full responsibility for the organization*
2. *Humility: Understanding that one's knowledge is not the complete and relying on others is critical*
3. *Adaptively planning: Continuity planning with the immediate and longer view*

## Responsibility for Decision-Making

This is not time to push the panic button; this is time to bring in the balanced and thoughtful members of the board who are ready to work collaboratively and understand what is needed to take full responsibility for the well-being of our organizations in these uncertain times. There are critical questions to answer, and they vary depending on the mission of the organization. They are a starting point for inquiry.

1. What is our mission and which elements of that mission are most critical now?
2. What is our role in the time of this pandemic?
  - Should we hibernate and put the organization — not just our employees — on furlough?
  - Are we an organization that should become virtual to further our mission? Or not.
  - Do we need all our employees? Should we keep all employees to benefit from the CARES Act, or is there another approach? What financial resources can we tap into: Reserves? Endowment? Pledges? Grants?
3. What do we tell our donors and are we their priority now?
4. Should we jump on every webinar to find out what to do?

These are just some of the decisions to be faced by the board, in partnership with the chief executive. In addition, the board leadership must determine whether to convene as a full board or as an executive committee; but convene it must. And then be present and act.

## Humility

This means that executive and board leaders need to have the self-awareness of their own strengths and capabilities and know what additional expertise is needed for the organization. Again, stepping up and being that strategic asset. What expertise does the chief executive have? The members of the board? Each person needs to think about the skills, knowledge, wisdom, and connections that can be brought so that the organization is guided meaningfully and effectively in this time. Note the term

“guided” — this is not license for micromanagement, but it is a time to agree on action and take it.

1. Do we need help making decisions affecting our employees and those we serve?
2. Do we need legal, financial, funding, HR, and/or management advice?
3. What are the ethical and moral implications of the decisions we must make?
4. Does the expertise we need exist in members of the board or through others, including other organizations?
5. Should members of the board or others be called on to serve in an advisory or volunteer capacity?

### **Adaptive Planning**

How do we create a plan and bring order based on evolving priorities during such uncertainty?

1. What will we look like in 90 days? In 180 days?
2. Do we have a business continuity plan? What does re-start look like?
3. What is our fundraising plan? Should we fundraise? Should we convert recurring membership fees to contributions?
4. Should we examine collaborations, a partnership or merger, or folding?
5. How will we learn from this and plan for restarting?

A trusting partnership between board and chief executive is imperative for healthy and productive navigation of these times. As we step into somewhat different lanes, we need to keep in mind that no one person can do it all.

There is no magic; even if your organization is not governed by a high-performing board, it has a chance to seize this moment and change. As this seismic shift is upon us, it is incumbent upon each of us to be present, to be that strategic asset. We must examine the changes each of us must make to lead in this moment. Don't do it all; do what matters. Look to the one, two, or more people and the one, two, or more issues where you must come together decisively. And act strategically.

This is pivotable moment. It is time to step up. To paraphrase ancient text: “where leadership is needed, be that leader.”

While we might ultimately have to learn how to go back to our lanes, right now we need to work together in new ways. Let's hope that when the time comes to go back to our lanes, we have learned to do so with greater partnership, humility, responsibility, and adaptive planning. As leaders, we understand that our values guide us, and today we know that our future depends on it. Be Present.

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