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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND BOARD CHAIR:

A Dynamic Duo for Conservation

Often the roles of board president and executive director are described in terms of how they are different, with the board president focused on the future and the executive director focused on daily organizational management and program implementation.

But, ideally, these two individuals act as a dynamic duo. Like Batman and Robin or Xena and Gabrielle, together the board president and executive director are tasked with working toward fulfilling a common mission. A strong partnership between these two individuals—based on trust, communication and respect—not only helps the board and staff to understand each other’s needs and work more efficiently, but also sets the tone for interactions throughout the organization.

Work Out Your Roles

How can you go about creating a dynamic duo for your organization? The first step is to make sure the board president and the executive director understand each other’s roles. On high-functioning teams, each player has a particular role. Understanding this is essential if organizational leadership is to be effectively shared. In nonprofits these roles are typically grounded in an understanding of the difference between governance and day-to-day management.

Nonprofit experts often describe the relationship in “one-size-fits-all” terms, drawing clear lines between the board chair’s role in governance and leading the board versus the executive’s role in managing the day-to-day operations and leading staff. But that division of labor does not always have to be followed. In her article “Effective Board Chair–Executive Director Relationships: Not About Roles!” Mary Hiland provides examples where the board president has regular communications with staff and even provides strategy guidance to staff. However, her main message is that roles need to develop by mutual agreement, designed to benefit the organization, and should be discussed, evaluated and revised over time.

The work of determining roles and building trust does not have to happen only at the start of the dynamic duo relationship. Indeed, most of the pairs studied by Hiland worked out their roles together as their relationship evolved; pairs who

defined expectations early did not necessarily develop the strongest relationships.

To Do #1: Discuss the traditional division of roles based on the board chair’s role being governance and the executive’s role in managing the day-to-day operations and think about whether that model makes sense for your organization. How does the typical model play out in various scenarios? How might variations from the traditional model of hard lines between governance and management serve the organization; how might it cause problems? What approach do you agree to utilize and why?

Learn About Each Other’s Abilities and Styles

As you discuss the division of roles between the executive director and board chair, take into account the unique skills contributed by each member of your dynamic duo.

Explore each other’s strengths, weaknesses and styles—by the way, this requires that you share transparently with each other and be willing to bring your whole authentic self to your role. This level of sharing might require some uncomfortable conversations about topics like cultural difference, power and privilege. In her blog on “10 Great Board Chair Practices,” Marla Cornelius advises leaders to “be aware about your own power and privilege . . . through examining aspects of your personal identity such as race, gender, age or class.” Leadership of the organization will benefit from leaders willing to work together in ways that maximize strengths and compensate for weaknesses. Keep talking, learning and accommodating changes as the relationship evolves.

To Do #2: In determining how to best develop the board chair–executive director leadership partnership for your land trust,

Answering the Right Questions

Use the following questions to have a dialogue and co-create a relationship with your board president or executive director based on mutual understanding and expectations.

- What does effective board president leadership look like from our perspective?
- What does effective executive director leadership look like from our perspective?
- What are our shared and different roles in leading the land trust?
- How frequently shall we have regular communications?
- Who is responsible for 1) creating board meeting agendas, 2) talking to underperforming board members and 3) holding board members accountable for their commitments?
- What are our strengths and weaknesses? Where can we leverage our strengths to support our weaknesses?
- What does disagreeing constructively look like?
- What are our commitments to each other? To the land trust?
- How will we exemplify mutual trust and respect?
- How do our land trust policies and procedures support and guide our roles? •

consider the unique skills and strengths contributed by each member of your dynamic duo as well as each other's weaknesses. Where can the two of you agree on flexibility to tap each other's unique skills and abilities? How can one person's strength complement the other's weakness? If necessary, find someone who can help you navigate challenging issues like power and privilege.

Agree on Strategic Direction and Priorities

Imagine if Batman and Robin disagreed on which bad guy to confront or on which baby to save. Their partnership would be rocky to say the least. Similarly, if your executive director and board president aren't headed in the same direction, your organization will be in for trouble.

But note that while it is vital that both leaders work toward fulfilling a common mission, their perspectives will be different. Winning teams have some players who keep their eyes on the big goal and others who orchestrate the details. Each team member must have both a commitment to the team and the desire to achieve the team's goal.

This sounds easier than it is. Many nonprofits are working toward a vision that cannot possibly be accomplished in a single board chair's term, or even a single lifetime. It takes a special kind of commitment to lead an organization under those conditions. It means keeping the long-term goal in mind and making sure short-term decisions don't

undermine the overall direction of the organization. If the two top leaders aren't clear on how to do this, no one else will be either.

To Do #3: Take some time to sit down together and go over your organization's strategic priorities at least quarterly.

Keep Communication Channels Open and Respectful

Maybe you don't have a bat phone you can use to call each other, but your dynamic duo needs to establish regular communication channels. Does one of you prefer email and the other texts? Respect those preferences and your communications will go much more smoothly.

Keep in mind that both of you are busy. Always have a meeting agenda, shared early, for each meeting—even phone and online meetings—that result in moving forward on issues. Establish expectations for responding to communications and establish boundaries that respect personal time, such as not expecting the executive to respond after work hours or on weekends.

Be ready for conflict, a part of any successful relationship. The board president and executive director should exemplify respectful disagreement and conflict resolution for the rest of the board and staff.

I was recently facilitating a board retreat and a great question came up about the protocols of communication when a board member has a concern about how something

is going in the organization. I loved the executive's response: "When we have a problem, think about how you would want to be treated. Show me the same courtesy. We will talk things through."

To Do #4: Agree on what information must be shared, the form of contact that is preferred (email, in-person meetings, phone calls, texts) and how frequently to communicate. Determine how you will respectfully and promptly address and resolve disagreements and how you will present disagreements publicly if they aren't resolved.

Build Mutual Trust and Respect

Trust is absolutely indispensable to the two organizational leaders. When she studied 16 board chair-executive director partnerships, Hiland found that trust-building was the most important dynamic influencing the relationships, and that the best relationships were based on closer, more personal connections.

According to Hiland, "The importance of connection, caring and meaning should not be lost in an over-emphasis on more 'business-like' practices and claims of harried busyness."

Other ways to build trust include being comfortable sharing bad news, and sharing the work of solving problems rather than assigning blame.

To Do #5: Rather than avoid personal connections with your counterpart, look for ways to build a personal dimension into your relationship.

It is never too late to build a stronger relationship. Even successful board chair-executive director teams with years of experience working together can benefit from sitting down together and working on their relationship. Spending at least as much time building your own dynamic duo as you do watching the latest superhero movie will be one of the best investments you can make. 🍎

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Resources

Cornelius, Marla. "10 Great Board Chair Practices." CompassPoint. 2/12/2016. www.compasspoint.org/blog/10-great-board-chair-practices

Hiland, Mary. "The Board Chair-Executive Director Relationship: Dynamics that Create Value for Nonprofit Organizations." OD PRACTITIONER Vol. 47 No.1 2015, P. 37. www.hilandconsulting.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/ODP-V47No1-Hiland.pdf

Hiland, Mary. "Effective Board Chair-Executive Director Relationships: Not About Roles!" Nonprofit Quarterly. 8/29/2018. <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/effective-board-chair-executive-director-relationships-not-about-roles> •