

# Checklist for Success as a Board Chair

By Betsy Rosenblatt

There are board chairs. And there are great board chairs. Being a conscientious board member is one thing: in itself a challenging, time-consuming job. But becoming the chair of the board means a lot more responsibility. As the top volunteer at a nonprofit, the chair must have a commitment to the success of an organization and a vision for its future. A chair must be able to handle people with skill and diplomacy as he or she works with the chief executive, other board members, and funders, community members, and other outsiders. A chair must be able to lead, solve problems, chart new territory, and act in the best interest of the organization. If you are a board chair or are considering becoming a board chair, these steps will help you make a positive impact on your organization.

**LEARN THE JOB.** Know what you're getting into before you agree to be board chair. Talk to former chairs and other board members about what has worked for the board and what you might try in the future. If there is anything you don't understand about the organization and how it works, find out now. Talk to staff, donors, members, clients, and anyone else who cares about your organization.

While the job of board chair is more than just running meetings, the ability to run a good meeting is one key to success. Good meetings keep people interested and motivated. Learn how to write and stick to a solid agenda, how to encourage participation from everyone on the board, how to facilitate lively but non-contentious debate, how to resolve conflict, and the other skills needed to keep a meeting running smoothly. Read books, talk with a coach or consultant, or ask advice from an accomplished board chair in your community.

**KNOW YOUR PEOPLE.** The chief executive is accountable to the board, but you also need to be there for the chief executive. Become his confidante. Understand her dreams, goals, concerns, and fears. Make the chief executive feel comfortable coming to you about anything, and establish a regular way to work together. Get to know at least some of the staff, and make sure staff knows you—you might even

Speak at a staff meeting. Schedule lunch or coffee with everyone on your board, individually or in groups, to get to know them and what unique strengths and talents they bring to the board. They will feel more comfortable contributing ideas and asking questions when they know you're interested in their opinions. Listen especially carefully to people who are a different race or have a different background from yourself or from the majority of the board members, and discuss how best to bring their perspective into discussions in a meaningful way. Introduce yourself to major funders and friends of the organization. Visit the organization's facilities a few times to see people in action.

**BUILD A TEAM.** Make sure the chief executive and staff know that you and the board are trying to accomplish the same mission they are. Don't try to protect your board or the staff by keeping secrets if there is bad news or by hiding failure. Make sure adequate information is reaching the board from the chief executive and staff. Be a good listener. Keep your cool and objectivity. Sure you have opinions, but as board chair you have to be able to be rational and neutral in heated debates. The board and chief executive must be confident that decisions that are best for the organization will be made. You hold that trust. If you are just too passionate about an issue, find a mediator or outsider to conduct a particular discussion. Your responsibility is to facilitate the board's search for consensus.

**SHOW UP.** Make your presence known in the community. Play up your role as ambassador to the community. Your credibility as the chief officer of the board, and as a volunteer willing to dedicate time and energy to an important cause, is high. Take advantage of that potential for publicity by speaking, appearing, or just talking up your organization whenever you have a chance. Go on funder visits. Use your contacts. Make new contacts. Get out there.

**LOOK AHEAD.** As soon as you take office, think about who will succeed you. If there isn't one already, create a governance committee that is charged with recruitment and orientation of new board members. If you don't have any good (and willing) candidates on the board for future officers and for chair, find new people from outside who will be able to learn the organization and also have the skills to lead. Provide training opportunities for future officers and chairs. Your job is to put (or keep) the organization in great shape for the next person who comes along.

