



ED Now Feature: Building the Board Chair-CEO Partnership

tags: [board chairs](#), [EDOs](#), [volunteers](#)

Louise Anderson on Sunday, March 23, 2014 at 7:19:00 pm

By Doug Eadie

Really board-savvy CEOs like Ronnie Bryant (President and CEO of the Charlotte Regional Partnership), Jeff Finkle at IEDC and Stuart Rogel (President and CEO of the Tampa Bay Partnership) know that investing in the development of a rock-solid board chair-CEO working relationship can yield powerful organizational dividends.

In fact, I would suggest that one of the preeminent priorities of a truly board-savvy CEO is to transform her board chair into a strong governing partner, a reliable ally, and when needed, an ardent change champion. The board chair makes an especially important partner for the CEO not only because of his formal authority as “CEO” of the governing board, but also the fact that board chairs are often major actors who wield tremendous influence in their communities.

Three of the most successful strategies I’ve seen board-savvy CEOs employ in building close and productive working relationships with their board chairs are: (1) to actively help the board chair succeed in her formal governing role; (2) to assist the board chair in having a richer, more satisfying experience beyond her formal governing role; and (3) to provide the board chair with ego satisfaction.

Ensuring success in the formal governing role

Board chairs, overwhelmingly, are unpaid volunteers in the nonprofit and public sectors, so truly board-savvy CEOs are always on the lookout for nonmonetary compensation that will not only reward the board chair for his service but will also help to cement the board chair-CEO working relationship.

The most obvious is for the CEO to go out of her way to ensure that the chair succeeds in his formal governing role. For example, the president & CEO of a local economic development corporation, without fail, spends at least an hour on the phone with his board chair before every meeting of the board’s governance committee, which the chair heads, going over the agenda point by point and answering any questions the chair might have, thereby making sure the chair is well prepared to lead discussion.

The president of a community college whose board participates in an annual day-long strategic planning work session not only always makes sure that her board chair plays a leading role in developing the agenda; she also prepares opening remarks for the chair to deliver and ensures that her chair is assigned to the breakout groups in which he is most interested. And in the external affairs arena, the board-savvy CEO of an economic development commission provides meticulous support for his board chair’s speaking engagements on behalf of the commission – not only making sure the chair is armed with talking points and visual aids, but even providing an opportunity to rehearse whenever the chair thinks it will help.

Ensuring a richer governing experience

In my experience, a less board-savvy CEO can easily miss the opportunity to cement the relationship with his board chair by helping her enrich her professional experience beyond the strict boundaries of her formal governing role. This is an important way the CEO can say, through concrete action, “I really do care about the quality of your experience, and I’ll do what I can to make it more interesting and rewarding, beyond helping you succeed in your governing role.” Don’t doubt for a minute that such attentiveness can be a powerful relationship builder. Of course, employing this relationship-building strategy effectively requires that the CEO make an effort to understand the board chair’s professional aspirations.

To take a real-life example, the CEO of a public transit authority learned that his board chair was passionate about community and economic development issues and hoped that her leadership of the transit authority

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What’s Hot at IEDC

We Need Your Input on Non-financial Incentives!

IEDC’s Economic Development Research Partners program is researching best practices in non-financial inducements for business attraction – that is, the ways in which an EDO can provide business assistance apart from purely financial incentives.

To better understand what

might earn her a seat at the community development table. As it happened, when the CEO was asked to fill a vacant seat on the board of the county economic development commission, he recommended that, instead, his board chair represent the authority on the commission board. When I was discussing this with the board chair a couple of months later, she made clear that she deeply appreciated her CEO's consideration, telling me that she was "bowled over" by the CEO's gesture.

Providing ego satisfaction

Board chairs typically are blessed with robust egos; that's one of the reasons they've become their boards' leaders. Board-savvy CEOs know that a fairly simple, inexpensive way to strengthen the relationship with the chair is to capitalize on opportunities to provide the chair with ego satisfaction. Some common examples include inviting the board chair to sit in on a meeting with the local paper's editorial board or to participate in a radio talk show; recognizing the chair for her service in one of your nonprofit's publications; and making sure the chair keynotes the annual staff convocation.

Failing to attend to the normal ego needs of the board chair can cost an un-board-savvy CEO dearly. Several years ago, I worked with the board chair and CEO of a large health services nonprofit that had successfully merged with a sister organization. The board chair had played a leading role in what turned out to be a grueling negotiation process that culminated in the merger, taking countless hours away from his legal practice over a period of six months. On one of my visits not long after the merger's implementation, I walked into the nonprofit's conference room for a meeting with the board chair and found him fuming.

Asking what was wrong, I was handed the front page of the local paper, with a feature article on the merger. "Read this," he said. Puzzled that he wasn't more pleased at the front-page coverage, I read through the article. The CEO was quoted several times. Guess who wasn't quoted at all? Guess who hadn't even been invited to sit in on the meeting with the reporter who wrote the article? Guess who was still miffed weeks later? This is a perfect example of un-board-savvyness at work. The sad thing is that if the CEO had been paying attention, making sure the board chair was mentioned prominently in the article would have been easy to accomplish.

This article is excerpted and adapted from Doug Eadie's 21st book, The Board-Savvy CEO (www.theboardsavvyceo.com). For more, listen to an interview with Jeff Finkle and Stuart Rogel. IEDC members can purchase The Board-Savvy CEO at a 20 percent discount by going to www.theboardsavvyceo.com and using the discount code: IEDC.

non-financial inducements are being used in the industry, IEDC has developed a [short survey](#). The results will be published in a white paper in mid-2014. The survey should only take about 15 minutes, and your input is valuable – [take the survey today!](#)

Call for Entries: 2014 Excellence in Economic Development Awards

IEDC's [Excellence in Economic Development Awards](#) recognize the world's best economic development programs and partnerships, marketing materials, and the year's most influential leaders. These 34 awards honor organizations and individuals for their efforts in creating positive change in urban, suburban, and rural communities. Winners are recognized at IEDC's Annual Conference.


Submit your entry before the **early entry deadline of April 11** and save! The final deadline is **May 16**. Download the [Awards Entry Packet](#) and contact Kerry Burgott with questions (awards@iedconline.org or 202-223-7800).


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If you would like to nominate a student for a Bollinger Foundation grant, you can fax the completed [nomination form](#) to (202) 223-4745, attn. Katelyn Palomo, or mail to The Bollinger Foundation, c/o IEDC, 734 15th St. NW / Suite 900, Washington, DC 20005

For more information, visit www.bollingerfoundation.org.

Resources

Do you know about IEDC's Site Selection Data Standards?

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This data set contains over 1,200 data elements organized into 25 spreadsheets. [Learn more](#) or [download the data standards spreadsheet](#) (176 Kb Excel file).

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