

Board Performance: Where Do We Stand?

by Suzanne M. Kearney, Executive Director

The annual orientation offered to new trustees each September by the Office of Sponsored Ministries asks each person to be open to a call to board leadership. This request is based on two premises: every board member is a potential board Chair; and there are numerous opportunities in serving on a board for every board member to develop and test her/his capacity for leadership.

Role of the Board Chair

Most of us are familiar with the Chair of the Board. That is the person who runs the meetings and welcomes people at any gathering hosted by the Board of Trustees. So, what does the Chair really do?

Typically, the Chair of the Board of Trustees is the focal point and leader for the process of governance, which encompasses the functions of setting direction, making policy and strategic decisions, overseeing and monitoring the ministry's performance and ensuring overall accountability. The Chair sees to it that the Board fulfills its responsibilities.

Responsibilities of the Board Chair

The Chair then:

- Serves as the chief volunteer of the organization
- Is a partner with the chief executive in achieving the ministry's mission
- Ensures that the Board articulates a shared vision of and strategic direction for the ministry and provides proper oversight of the ministry to ensure it is achieving its mission optimally
- Chairs meetings of the Board after developing the agenda with others (typically, the chief executive and the Executive Committee)
- Sees that the Board functions effectively, interacts with management optimally, and fulfills all of its duties
- Appoints committee chairs, in consultation with others (typically, the chief executive and the Executive Committee)
- Serves as an ex-officio member of all committees
- Ensures that the chief executive is evaluated annually

- Ensures that the Board's performance is evaluated annually
- Serves as spokesperson for the ministry as needed
- Fulfills other assignments that the Chair and chief executive agree are appropriate and desirable for the Chair to perform

BOARD CHAIR'S BEST PRACTICES

Provide "safe" opportunities for people to surface issues of concern.

Link committee charges to the strategic plan of the ministry.

Use annual goal setting to keep the ministry on track.

Teach Board members about making informed and timely decisions.

Make sure all Board members understand the financial statements of the ministry.

Sound dull? Ah, but look behind the scenes. That is what makes the life of a Chair interesting and challenging and also demands a range of skills.

1. **Facilitation and process skills** enable the Chair to manage a group, understand the dynamics and help members to act responsibly and effectively for the present and future benefit of the ministry.
2. **Communication ability** means the Chair speaks clearly and knowledgeably about the ministry, listens and hears the needs of Board and staff members, understands what is working/not working in the organization, and ensures that all members enjoy both respectful interchange and productive working relationships.
3. **Relational capacity** allows the Chair to work comfortably with Board members, senior staff and other key

constituencies, gaining both their trust and confidence. Building relationships makes it possible for the chair to find solutions and build consensus even when the options are less than attractive.

4. **Vision and know-how** mean that the Chair has both an inspiring picture of the ministry's future, rooted in its mission, that resonates with the convictions, hopes and dreams of others, and the drive to move the organization in the right direction in a timely manner, avoiding the extremes of needless foot-dragging or feverish rush to action.
5. **Fundraising experience** affords the Chair tested skills in selecting and supporting leaders to seek out sources of funds for the ministry and in motivating others to give.
6. **Spiritual sensitivity** is the Chair's ability to connect the work of the ministry and the Board with the deepest needs of people to do something worthwhile and thereby call forth their best efforts. It is what draws people and the ministry to exceed all expectations with enthusiasm and passion.

Chances are that, if your Board's performance scores highly with you and others, your Chair has these skills and is managing the behind-the-scenes activities wisely.

Succession Planning

How is your Board preparing the next Board Chair? Do you have a succession plan? Does the plan include a mentoring opportunity? The role of the Chair is far too important to leave to chance or some default position.

Ready To Be Chair

Depending on the needs and stage of development of your ministry, here are some signs to look for.

- Demonstrated commitment of energy, time, skills and engagement
- Leadership experience in committee and special assignment work
- Personal capacity to give the time and energy to be a leader
- Compelling vision and deep passion for your ministry

GREAT LEADERSHIP

"What makes a great leader? Some say it is the ability to give a clear sense of direction. Some, that it is the ability to make tough decisions. Others, that great leadership is the ability to command and control, or, conversely, to inspire loyalty in those led through strong emotional empathy. I think that great leadership depends primarily on vision – not just any type of vision, but one that we can appreciate intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually." Danah Zohar, "Spiritual Intelligent Leadership," Leader to Leader, No. 38, Fall 2005, 45.