



The Muttart Fellowships



**The Board and
Executive Director:
Developing and Nurturing
an Effective Relationship**

Kelly Sloan

Each item in The Muttart Fellowship Products Series carries “the look” designed for the program. The concept incorporating pebbles and water fits with the Zen-like qualities of the visual identity of the Fellowship Program.

Each front-cover pebble is different—representing the uniqueness of each fellow and what s/he has to offer. Applicants are like pebbles among pebbles. After each is refreshed and renewed through the Fellowship year, s/he has an impact on the nonprofit charitable sector like the rings the pebble creates on a pond of water.

The varied use of this design recognizes the individuality of the Fellows while also creating a unified look to the Muttart Fellowship Products Series.

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- provide senior managers within the social-services sector with an opportunity for a sabbatical year—a chance to recharge and renew themselves.

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For more information about the project, please contact:

Executive Director
The Muttart Foundation
1150 Scotia Place 1
10060 Jasper Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta T5J 3R8



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Dedication

I dedicate this manuscript to my dad who was diagnosed and died of cancer during my fellowship year.

Thanks for everything over the years, Dad.

Acknowledgements

There are a number of people who, through their suggestions or participation, played a direct role in the successful completion of my research project. I am grateful because, without them, I would not have had this tremendous experience of a fellowship year doing research:

- Larry Derkach for suggesting that an area of interest to me would make an interesting and useful fellowship topic.
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- The people who agreed to be interviewed for this research project; they shared their insights about relationships and ways of work in hopes of helping other organizations in the voluntary sector. Hopefully, I have provided an effective means for their wisdom to benefit others.
- YWCA Edmonton Board of Directors and Presidents who approved my leave of absence and the staff, especially Sher, who ensured that quality services and operations continued.
- The Muttart Foundation and its fellowship committee. During my fellowship year, I experienced significant personal life changes. Words cannot express how grateful I am to have had the gift of time this year to be with my parents during Dad's illness, to support my daughter's experiences at a new school, and to enjoy my first year of marriage. Through your approval of my research and respite period, you truly made a difference for me and my family this year. Thank you.

The members of my family and close friends each in their own way also helped me during this fellowship year:

- My daughter by ensuring that I never forgot my parenting responsibilities
- Mom and Dad for being fine role models of grace, courage, and true love in tough times.
- My brother and sister-in-law for being there when needed.
- Relatives and family friends—especially Auntie Joy, Bob, and Merle—for helping Mom and Dad when we could not be there and even when we were. It allowed me to concentrate on the research when necessary.
- Grandma Renee by inspiring all of us with her positive attitude and strength.
- Our friends for always checking in to see how things were going and remembering us in their prayers.
- My husband Rick for his wisdom, balanced perspective, unwavering support, and always doing far more than should ever be expected of anyone.

Because of these many individuals, I have had a year of tremendous personal and professional growth. Thank you everyone for all your support.

Chapter 1

Research Overview

Character versus Skills

I began working in the voluntary sector in August 1990 at the Saskatoon YWCA. Prior to that, I taught in small Saskatchewan towns for three years. Those three years were formative in that I developed a clear opinion on what *not* to do if you want effective relationships between institutional leadership and organizational staff. After leaving the public school system, I started work in the nonprofit sector during which time I also finished a Master of Education degree. Both experiences contributed to my understanding of effective relationships between staff and board members. I carried insights from all these experiences into my current executive director position in the voluntary sector where I have worked effectively with successive boards over the years.

However, I believe my success with executive director/board relationships is not due primarily to my teaching experiences or formal education. Rather, I believe it is a result of the kind of person I am reflected in my words and actions in ordinary, everyday events. I was raised on a southwest Saskatchewan farm by parents respected in the community for hard work and integrity, among other things. So I learned at an early age the importance of honesty, forthrightness, and generosity with my time and resources. Reflecting now on learnings from this research project, as well as discussions over the years with colleagues, I now believe that, in my “growing up” years, I developed personal qualities that lend themselves to having an effective relationship with a board of directors. Hence, I have concluded that the main reason I have

had an effective relationship with different boards of directors is because of the way I am, the kind of person I am, my values of honesty, and how I talk to people as much as it is due to my competence in “hard” skills. Having heard many tales of woe about the disintegration of the relationship between executive directors and their boards, I began to feel strongly that the leaders in the nonprofit sector (boards of directors and executive directors) needed to reflect on the nature of their own relationships that are pivotal to the success of their organization. This book relays the insights from executive directors and board chairs as well as the discussion starters that will hopefully enable boards and executive directors to reflect upon their relationships and take proactive steps to ensure their ongoing effectiveness.

Importance to the Nonprofit Sector

2 There has been recognition by the Voluntary Sector Initiative, Canadian Policy Research Network, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, The Muttart Foundation, and several others that the turnover of senior leadership in the voluntary sector requires our attention. In this context, several studies and authors have identified that employer relationships are central to executive director job satisfaction. The study *What’s a Good Job? The Importance of Employment Relationships*¹ revealed that “strong employment relationships positively influence job satisfaction, skill use and development, workplace morale, and worker absenteeism. Overall, strong employment relationships contribute to the quality of work life and the performance of the organization.” In *Leadership Lost: A Study on Executive Director Tenure and Experience*², the authors looked at how to help the boards of nonprofit agencies work more effectively with executive directors. The executive directors surveyed identified interpersonal

¹ Graham S. Lowe and Grant Schellenberg. *What’s a Good Job: The Importance of Employment Relationships*. (Ottawa: Canadian Policy and Research Network, 2001), p. xv.

² Tim Wolfred. *Leadership Lost: A Study on Executive Director Tenure and Experience*. (San Francisco: CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, 1999).

relationships as one of the three most significant things affecting their job satisfaction. A third report, *Strengthening the Capacity of Executive Directors by the National Learning Initiative*³, raises points on how to improve the board/executive director relationship for organizational well-being. A fourth study, conducted for the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation by Tom Adams⁴, interviewed executive directors and board chairs and identified that the most frequent reason for executive directors' dissatisfaction with their position was working with the board. A fifth study, *Daring to Lead: Nonprofit Executive Directors and Their Work Experiences*⁵, also found that relationships are central to job satisfaction for the organization's senior leadership. Fisher Howe, in *The Nonprofit Leadership Team*⁶, said that "personal qualities and personal relationships—the ways of doing business—are fundamental to the effective governance and management of the Leadership Team." In spite of these and other authors highlighting the importance of the executive director/board of directors relationship, there remains limited research on specific practices and actions that can create or maintain an effective relationship between an organization's board of directors and executive director. Within my own professional network, I have discussed the question of the relationship with board members in my own organization and others as well as with executive directors in other organizations. All said they believe the relationship is pivotal to the success of any organization.

In this research project, when board chairs and executive directors were asked how much their relationship affected their general level of satisfaction in their job or volunteer position, they unanimously

³ Keith Seel and Anita Angelini. *Strengthening the Capacity of Executive Directors: A Pilot Project for the National Learning Initiative for the Voluntary Sector*. (Ottawa: Government of Canada—National Learning Initiative, 2004), pp. 17-19.

⁴ Tom Adams. *Executive Director-Board Relationships: The Key to an Organization's Success*. (Washington, D.C.: Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation, 1995). Available: <http://www.nw.org/nwis/organization/mantoolorgsuc.htm>.

⁵ Jeanne Peters and Timothy Wolfred. *Daring to Lead: Nonprofit Executive Directors and Their Work Experiences*. (San Francisco: CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, 2001), pp. 3, 24-28, 32, 35.

⁶ Fisher Howe. *The Nonprofit Leadership Team: Building the Board-Executive Director Partnership*. (Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 2004), p. 1.

said that the relationship was central. One executive director stated that “if your board members are not supportive of you, then you’re not happy and you’re always second-guessing yourself.” Another participant felt that “it’s important you feel part of the circle. If you’re fighting with the board or, heaven forbid, trying to conceal things, then it’s like being in an unfaithful marriage. You can’t sustain that.” By ensuring that an effective relationship exists, one is ensuring the organization’s well-being, which in turn ensures the nonprofit sector’s strength and well-being.

Methodology

I looked first at the theory of an effective relationship between the board and executive director. Much of the literature refers to types of support each party can provide, how communication can be effective, how emotional intelligence is reflected in workplace behaviors, and so on. That is, the literature reflected strategies that should be used to run the organization well, but very little literature explained how these strategies also might have a positive impact on the relationship between the executive director and the board of directors.

Rather than being an objective unto itself, this literature review provided constructs from which to create a framework for 75 interview questions. Twelve interviews were conducted with either executive directors or board chairs of nonprofit organizations. The practices and philosophical constructs from the literature were presented to the interview participants. Regardless of how many of the practices were used in their organization, interview participants were asked to identify:

- which practices used in their organization were most important to the relationship
- what was done to ensure those practices were in place
- how each practice influenced their relationship.

The chapters with interview results include both paraphrases and direct quotations from the interview participants in order to bring to life the nature of the relationships in their organizations.

Demographic Information

Seven different organizations were studied. In five organizations, both the chair and the executive director were interviewed. In order to participate, all organizations were required to have a self-described successful relationship between the two parties. Given this small sample size, the research findings are anecdotal and may or may not apply to all charities.

Profile of Organizations

- All are nonprofit organizations and all but one have registered charitable status.
- Five are located in Edmonton and two in Saskatoon.
- Sectors represented include social services, sports, environment, training, arts, and funders.
- Length of time in operation with a board ranged from three to 35 years with a mean of 13 years.
- Annual budgets range from \$200,000 to \$ 3.5 million with two organizations under \$500,000 and three organizations over \$2 million.
- Number of staff ranges from three to 47 with a mean of 12.
- Boards meet monthly in five organizations; quarterly in one; and every two months in one.
- All boards used a flexible policy governance model rather than an administrative or operational (hands-on) one.

This particular study deals with *governance* boards rather than *administrative* or *operational* boards. Some topics discussed relate to a Carver-type board, while others apply to any governance board, Carver or not. However, some of the principles and actions described may be applicable to operational boards and executive directors or other relationships in the organization.

Profile of Interview Participants

- Six people were executive directors, five were chairs of the board of directors, and one had recently become past chair.
- Executive directors had been in their positions two-and-a-half years to 25 years with a mean of six years. Two of the six executive directors were in their first executive director position, while the others had held executive director positions previous to their current one. All but one executive director also had significant number of years volunteering on other nonprofit boards ranging as high as 40 cumulative years for one person.
- Board chairs had been in their positions from six months (beginning of their term) to two years (completed their term). All board chairs except one had experience on other nonprofit boards, and three had also held executive director positions for other organizations at some point in their careers.
- Executive directors had anywhere from two to 15 people reporting directly to them; on average, six staff reported directly to the executive director. Current board size ranged from 12 to 21 people, with an average of 16.
- Number of hours worked or volunteered each week ranged from 40 to 70 for executive directors (or 53 on average), while board members volunteered hours ranged from two to 15 (seven per week on average).

6 Introducing this Study

In order to understand how certain strategies and elements of emotional intelligence influence organizational effectiveness and, consequently, the relationship between board and executive director, it is best to read the report in the order presented. However, if an organization believes it is struggling with one area in particular (for example, how the type of information-sharing has influenced their relationship), it is certainly feasible to read that particular chapter for insight. Whichever method the reader chooses, no one chapter should be read in isolation without the context provided in Chapter Two about trust, respect, and appreciation.

Chapter Two outlines the literature and interview participants' perspectives on trust, respect, and appreciation as well as other aspects of an effective relationship. Interview participants were first asked how they knew that an effective relationship existed in their organization and, secondly, they were asked specific questions about trust, respect, and appreciation—all areas identified in the literature as being key to an effective relationship.

Chapter Three reviews specific actions and behaviors between executive directors and boards of directors that lead to organizational effectiveness and, therefore, help create an effective relationship. These include executive director and board support for each other, the chair/executive director relationship, communication effectiveness, and the extent of teamwork.

Interview participants identified organizational effectiveness as one of the top two things that has an impact upon the relationship between the board of directors and executive director. Chapter Four details what areas of organizational effectiveness have the greatest impact on the relationship.

Chapter Five addresses how emotional intelligence and other leadership qualities influence the board/executive director relationship. In addition to organizational effectiveness (Chapter Four), interview participants identified emotional intelligence as the other major thing that can impact a relationship. In other words, it is not just what is done, but how it is done, that has an impact on the relationship between an executive director and the board of directors.

All chapters include a brief summary of the literature as well as comments and interview results. My literature summaries represent a compilation of themes often from various sources.

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At the end of the book, I summarize the practices and actions that can positively assist the relationship. In addition, I provide some questions to help an organization begin its discussion on how to have a more effective relationship between its executive director and board of directors.

New Thinking about Roles

Occasionally, the reader may notice a focus from the interview responses on the role of the executive director, both what they contribute to an effective relationship and how they benefit. Of special note is “New Thinking about Roles” in Chapter One in which the literature proposes executive directors should be more involved in areas that, in some organizations, were traditionally and previously defined as strictly board domain.

Interview results support the idea that the executive director plays a central role of in an organization’s operations and effective governance. In the organizations interviewed, all had self-defined successful relationships between the executive director and board of directors—partly because the executive director actively participated in board matters. The caveat is that executive directors were strategic in their areas of involvement and, more importantly, how they got involved (i.e., the manner in which they conducted themselves and tone of their participation) in matters typically viewed as board domain. For example, executive directors offered support and guidance to their boards of directors on board matters as opposed to taking over control of a board function. At the same time, the board members welcomed the participation of their executive director and, in fact, sometimes referred to it as “showing leadership.”

8 When they discussed support required from their executive director and board actions related to effective governance, board chair interviewees put them into the context of how they could help or hinder the executive director and operations. For example, the questions for discussion at the end of this book include, “Does either party ever feel that the board is getting too involved in operations (micromanaging).” There is no equivalent question about executive directors getting too involved in board governance, because it was not raised as a concern during the interviews while almost all interviewees, including board chairs, commented on the need for the board not to micromanage the executive director’s work. Again, this supports the idea described above that boards of directors not only accept, but expect their executive directors’ active participation in board matters and that, done correctly, this helps rather than hinders the relationship between the two parties.

This observation marks a departure from more traditional views of the interaction between the executive director and the board of directors in governance matters. Some organizations reading this report may wish to increase the extent of the executive director's participation in board matters to reflect what the interviewees described and I have summarized. The degree to which the relationship improves can be tangible but, as with any organizational change, this happens only if change is managed fairly and appropriately. Before embarking upon any changes in an effort to improve the relationship, organizations should first reflect at length on the nature of their own executive director/ board of directors relationship with the use of discussion questions suggested at the end of this book.

Chapter 2

Mutual Trust, Respect, and Appreciation

Before examining *how* to create an effective relationship, I looked first at what signs indicate that the relationship *is* effective in the first place. In other words, how can an executive director and board of directors know that their relationship is effective? From a review of the literature, three themes emerged with which interview participants first agreed and then added some of their own ideas

Literature

Most of the literature on relationships and partnerships contains references to building mutual trust, respect, and appreciation and says that all three are important to effective relationships. The literature suggests that respect leads to trust, trust leads to respect, and mutual appreciation for the talents of each party leads to both trust and respect.⁷ Lencioni describes vulnerability-based trust as situations in which individuals expose themselves to risk of harm from the other party but suffer no dire consequences (for

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⁷ Nancy Axelrod. "Board Leadership and Board Development," The Jossey-Bass Handbook of Nonprofit Leadership and Management. Edited by Robert Herman and Associates. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), pp. 119-35. Robert Gale. *Leadership Roles in Nonprofit Governance*. (Washington, D.C.: Board Source, 2003), p. ix.

Howe, *The Nonprofit Leadership Team: Building the Board-Executive Director Partnership*, p. 17.

Warren Bennis. "The Leadership Advantage." *Leader to Leader* No. 12 (Spring 1999). Available: <http://www.pdf.org/leaderbooks/L2L/spring99/bennis.html>.

Frances Hesselbein. "The Indispensable Partnership." *Leader to Leader* No. 33 (Summer 2004). Available: <http://www.pdf.org/leaderbooks/L2L/summer2004/fh.html>.

Frances Hesselbein. "The Power of Civility." *Leader to Leader*, No. 5 (Summer 1997). Available: <http://www.pdf.org/leaderbooks/L2L/summer97/fh.html>.

example, admitting a mistake).⁸ Appreciating each individual as a human being and not just one who has talents also is mentioned: “Good manners are critical to success in workplace relationships. Good manners flow from genuine appreciation of their colleagues individually. We acknowledge the humanity of the other person when we communicate at many levels that person’s worth and dignity. This is how we build relationships that unleash the human spirit⁹.”

In spite of these references, however, little in the literature specifies practices or actions within an organization that can build trust, respect, or appreciation nor does the literature examine how to recognize when those feelings exist between the executive director and board of directors. So, to lay a foundation for examining current practices in the sector, the interview questions for this research project first attempted to determine what is the basic foundation for an effective relationship.

Interview Results

Interview participants first were asked how they knew when the relationship between the executive director and board was working well. In other words, what were the signs or indicators that the relationship was effective? Common responses included:

- **Frequency and type of communication between board meetings.** Chair and executive director are in frequent contact by phone or e-mail. People (including the executive committee) receive timely information, and communication is open and direct.
- **Nature of discussions.** Parties understand one another’s perspectives, and people feel comfortable saying, “I don’t agree with that perspective.” Parties can discuss an issue from multiple viewpoints and identify the real issues without laying blame. Discussions are proactive and focused rather than adversarial or confrontational. Disagreements are constructive, with thoughtful and diplomatic responses.

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⁸ Patrick Lencioni, “The Trouble with Teamwork.” Leader to Leader No. 29 (Summer 2003). Available: <http://www.pfdr.org/leaderbooks/L2L/summer2003/lencioni.html>.

⁹ Hesselbein, “The Power of Civility.”

- **Attendance at board meetings.** Board meetings are well attended; people like coming to the meetings and have fun at them.
- **Active involvement.** Board members have proactive input and involvement rather than being a “rubber stamp.” Individual board members are engaged and participate fully. When asked what signs tell them that the board is actively engaged, interview participants gave the following examples:
 - Questions are meaningful, indicating an interest in getting information in order to understand the issues.
 - Body language indicates interest (leaning forward, smiling, talking amongst themselves about the issue on the table).
 - There is positive energy in the room during board meetings and many questions are asked.
 - Board members are willing to attend annual meetings of other organizations and to participate in community events.
- **Board understanding of its role.** If the board’s role is clear, it will “ stay out of” operations and let the executive director manage day-to-day operations.

Because the literature identified mutual trust/confidence, mutual respect, and mutual appreciation as indicators of an effective relationship, interview participants were asked what told them those feelings were present, what caused those feelings, and how they positively affect the relationship between the executive director and board of directors.

Signs of Mutual Trust, Respect, and Appreciation

Interview participants provided many examples that illustrate to them that mutual trust, respect, and appreciation exist, including:

- **Verbal expression of those feelings.** This includes:
 - *Public acknowledgement.* For example, when an executive director and board member attend an external meeting together, and the board member tells others at the meeting about the executive director's job effectiveness.
 - *Private acknowledgement.* For example, a board member tells the executive director about personal strengths (self-driven, high productivity, good instincts, etc.), the executive director tells a board member that s/he (executive director) trusts the board member, or conversations between board members indicate that they trust the executive director.
 - *Acknowledgement at board meetings.* For example, a board member will say to the executive director "we trust you to do this. Report back to us at the next meeting." A sign of appreciation is that the board thanks the executive director "for checking in" and compliments the executive director at the board meeting.
- **Clear understanding of roles.** For example, the board does not attempt to micromanage or to discuss details of operations. The board does not "second guess" the executive director on operational decisions.
- **Non-confrontational discussions and disagreements.** For example, the board and executive director talk about the tough issues openly; there is good debate and yet everyone feels honored and respected. The board listens to the executive director's rationale for decisions s/he's made. The executive director does not feel attacked at board meetings because disagreement is respectful. Communication is open and honest.
- **Body language.** For example, steady, supportive eye contact during discussions tells the executive director that board members feel heard.

- **Length of board member term.** For example, a long-term stay on the board could mean that a board member does not trust in the executive director, and that board member, therefore, feels a need to stay longer and “watch over” things. However, executive directors and chairs interviewed indicated that this is more often a sign that the relationship and organization are healthy.
- **Utilization of expertise.** For example, the board respects the executive director’s expertise because, for public presentations, they let the executive director prepare the presentation and answer questions that the board members cannot. The board usually agrees with executive director decisions after s/he has explained the rationale for them.

Signs that appreciation exists in an organization include:

- Staff receive a fair wage.
- People have fun at board meetings.
- At formal functions such as annual general meetings and board meetings, appreciation is formally articulated and thank-yous are given (for example, “thanks for the report” or “thanks for doing such a great job of the presentation” or “I liked the letter” or “I was at the event and it rocked”).

Developing Trust, Respect, and Appreciation

Interview participants identified a number of things that help develop trust, respect, and appreciation in the relationship. They felt, however, that these actions were not taken with the specific purpose of developing those feelings, but rather these actions were good practice in their organizations for other reasons and had the added benefit of helping to develop trust, respect, and appreciation. They do not think, at a conscious level, about what they can do to build these feelings; rather they are focused on effective practices within their organizations, which, in turn, develop trust, respect, and appreciation over time.

Interview participants concurred that trust, respect, and appreciation must be developed *over time* and that having the same people involved over a longer period of time helps create and maintain a *culture* of trust. The length of board terms was one example given. The longer the term (or the number of terms allowed), the more the board member's knowledge grows thereby increasing trust and the continuity for maintaining that culture of trust. In addition, previous experience on committees before joining the board meant that people already had interaction with the executive director through committee work. Therefore, they knew the executive director's competence and were familiar with the organizational culture of trust, respect, and appreciation for working together with the executive director.

Interview participants identified several activities within their organization that help to create trust, respect, and appreciation between the executive director and the board of directors. They included:

- **Personal level interactions.** Getting to know one another as people helps create a culture conducive to trust, respect, and appreciation developing over time. Examples given by interview participants include:
 - *Social functions.* When board members and staff have opportunities to get to know one another, it helps to create understanding of and respecting for one another.
 - *Individual meetings between executive director and board members.* When new board members start, the executive director meets with them individually in order to know their individual needs and interests. This helps develop understanding and respect. The executive director figures out how to give the board members what they want or need.
 - *How the executive director deals with each board member as an individual on an ongoing basis.* How interactions take place is as important as the fact that they do. The executive director must appreciate that each individual is different. (For example, one absentee board member might contact the executive director right away after missing one meeting, while another might be silent for weeks.)

- *Thoughtful gestures.* Examples include one party telling the other that s/he was missed while away on vacation, sending flowers or a card when someone is having a difficult time in life, or organizing the executive director's anniversary party.
- *Recognizing the humanity in one another.* A realistic view of people involves seeing their flaws and understanding that they make mistakes. Acknowledging this helps people maintain respect even in difficult circumstances.
- **Verbal acknowledgement.** When someone is told s/he is appreciated, this further develops the feeling, particularly if the words are spoken publicly. For example, interview participants frequently cited board meetings as a typical place where one party or the other could express feelings of appreciation ("Thank you") or trust ("This is your area of work. We trust you to do it"). In one organization, the chair spoke highly of the executive director's skills in this area stating that "(the executive director) is very thoughtful and diplomatic and therefore is very good at recognizing the accomplishments of board members when they contribute." Speaking words of praise to an external party was also favored as a means to generate more trust in and appreciation for both parties.
- **Clarification and acceptance of executive director and board roles.** Rather than feeling defensive when board members ask questions, the executive director should keep in mind that the board is ultimately responsible for the organization's well-being; consequently, it has a right to challenge or question what the executive director does. The executive director should, at appropriate times during board discussions, explain how s/he interprets his/her role. If the board agrees, it then must trust the executive director to fulfill this role publicly as it was expressed to the board.
- **Board feeling well informed.** In between meetings, the executive director sends regular updates by e-mail and gives detailed monthly reports. The consistency of the report, inclusion of more information than might be required, transparency of report, and the inclusion of "secrets" all help to create trust.

Ongoing board orientation is needed in order to maintain the culture of trust. When the board is kept informed of an issue all along, it will more likely trust and respect the executive director's recommendations or actions because it understands the background and rationale. Ongoing orientation, instead of an annual one-time event, is needed in order to maintain the culture of trust and respect.

One board chair described annual orientation this way. "It's like going away to church camp and getting saved. And then you come back to your old evil ways. Everybody's great and it lasts for a little while and then board members get back to their real lives and deadlines get missed or things aren't responded to. This can erode trust from the executive director."

- **Discussions are non-confrontational and productive.** As one executive director put it "do we fight constructively?" The ability to discuss the "hard" issues respectfully creates trust that people can express opinions without being attacked. It also leads both parties to believe that, no matter how hard the issues, "we can tackle it together and resolve it together." The executive director must encourage discussions about items that have values associated with them. This makes the board feel needed, engaged, and contributing—plus it builds trust that the executive director will not avoid the tough issues.
- **Competence of both executive director and board of directors.** If the executive director and board members meet or exceed expectations over and over again, mutual respect increases. Executive directors said, however, that their boards seldom, if ever, do self-evaluation so it would be difficult for boards to reflect in measurable ways on whether they were meeting standards of good governance.

Some interview participants felt that an executive director's positive performance review expressed appreciation for a job well done. One executive director described how competence influenced the relationship: "An executive director should want the board to think of them 'you've been right before, so I trust you now.' The executive director has to know what they're talking about. After the executive director has hit a few home runs or scored a few goals, the board's trust increases." If the organization is doing well, then confidence grows.

- **Ability of the chair to facilitate meetings.** Everyone should feel heard while the meeting moves through the agenda in a timely way.
- **Board recruitment.** Diversity of expertise recruited to the board of directors increases respect and appreciation for the value-added nature of the opinions and knowledge each person brings—particularly when other board members know that a board member was recruited for specific reasons.
- **Selecting jobs for board members based on their expertise.** The executive director makes suggestions to the board chair about which board member would be appropriate for a specific job because of his/her skills, abilities, knowledge, and interests (for example, who is good at public speaking, who has the historical perspective, who is good at looking to the future). The executive director respects what each board member brings to the table, and each board member respects the executive director's ability to capitalize on those strengths. If the executive director suggests changes to which board member does which job, it is with the organization's best interests in mind.
- **Executive director dedication.** "The executive director knows the organization, s/he breathes it, and s/he dedicates himself/herself to it. The board sees that and respects the amount of energy and commitment the executive director has given to it."
- **Effective communication.** Interview participants spoke of needing frequent contact between board meetings and indicated that the nature of communication should be open and transparent. More detail is provided in Chapter 13.
- **Being generous with time and resources.** Willingness to meet with people or be available helps develop appreciation that the parties are working on the relationship. In addition, an executive director said that sharing the organization's resources could be a means to develop appreciation in board members (for example, giving board members pins and pens to give out in the community and having personalized name tags and business cards for the volunteers).

Impact of Mutual Trust, Respect, and Appreciation

Interview participants described a number of benefits to the relationship by having mutual trust, respect, and appreciation between the executive director and board of directors. According to the interviews, an effective relationship built on mutual trust, respect, and appreciation results in the following:

- Because questions and challenges are respectful, less confrontation occurs. This leads to a culture of no confrontation where people feel comfortable expressing differing viewpoints and they feel that they have been heard.
- The executive director feels a high level of board support and is therefore motivated at work. For example, one board said that the board knows that the executive director's monthly report will focus board discussions on what the executive director needs from the board. The board members in that particular organization believe that, if the executive director brings them a task, then the board must be adding value to the organization and so they do it.
- Each party has a higher comfort level in providing guidance to the other when appropriate and, as one participant explained, the parties like each other as people and so are more likely to forgive mistakes.
- The parties do not try to control the activities of the other. For example, the board does not take over day-to-day operational tasks, and the executive director does not try to control board functions. At the same time, each party has a comfort level in assisting (or being involved to some degree) in roles and responsibilities traditionally thought to belong to the other.
- The organization can focus on the future, not the past. This allows for growth and for things to move forward "without the baggage" or time and resources spent fighting. In essence, having high degrees of trust, respect and appreciation allows the work of the organization to get done.

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The interviews made it readily apparent that there is a circular cause-and-effect dynamic between effective relationships and the aspects of mutual trust, respect, and appreciation. In other words,

the presence of these three aspects was not only a *sign* that the relationship was effective, but they were also critical to *creating* an effective relationship.

Trust, respect, and appreciation result from organizational effectiveness, by both parties supporting each other, by effective communication, and, in particular, by a high degree of emotional intelligence on both sides. In turn, having trust, respect, and appreciation helps the executive director and board achieve greater organizational effectiveness, helps them better support each other, and enables them to communicate more effectively.

When respect, trust, and appreciation exist in the relationship, implementing strategies (Chapter Three) becomes more effective and less frustrating for all.

Chapter Three

Actions that Mold Effective Relationships

Interview participants rated their organizations high in all practices described in this section but, as with all parts of the interview, they were to identify what actions had the *most* impact on the relationship between the board of directors and the executive director. In other words, they reflected on *what happens* or *what is done* as part of their job or volunteer position that influences the relationships. Chapter Three describes strategies for: the kind of support the executive director and board of directors provide to each other, the relationship between the executive director and board chair, and creation of a culture or organizational mindset that influences the relationship positively.

Executive Director Support to the Board

The literature identified several leadership strategies that an executive director could employ that would influence the relationship positively by creating trust, respect, and appreciation. Actions were not taken with the express purpose of influencing the relationship but, rather, are things that a wise executive director would do in the interests of the organization's effectiveness. Interview participants identified practices or actions in their own organizations that assisted the relationship.

Literature

Maureen Robinson states “the more effort an executive makes to develop a stronger board, the stronger the underlying relationship will be between the board and staff, and the more confidence and respect the board will have in the executive’s work. The key to a successful relationship between the board and the executive director is the care with which the (executive) director helps the board to be a good partner.”¹⁰ Support for this position is found throughout the literature with suggestions that executive directors should not be arms-length from their boards but rather should take a more proactive role in supporting them. Herman and Heimovics, in particular, give strong evidence that executive directors should accept their “psychological centrality” to the success of the organization and develop more “board-focused” leadership skills.¹¹

From the literature, emerge six themes of executive director support to the board that could potentially influence the relationship between the two parties. The literature identifies six areas requiring the executive director’s support to the board. These are:

- **Actively participate in board recruitment.** The executive director participates, to varying degrees, with identification, cultivation, and recruitment of new board members and helps develop processes for working together with the board.
- **Actively lead board orientation and education.** The executive director takes an active role by ensuring that the board receives ongoing education related to current issues or governance. The executive director organizes site tours, client visits, presentations, written materials. The executive director meets with each board member when s/he joins the board to answer questions and learn his/her areas of interest, experience, and knowledge.

¹⁰ Maureen K. Robinson, “Working Partnership: The Executive Director and the Board,” *Nonprofit Boards That Work: The End of One-Size Fits all Governance*. (Toronto: John Wiley and Sons, 2001), p. 113.

¹¹ Robert Herman and Dick Heimovics, “Executive Leadership,” *The Jossey-Bass Handbook of Nonprofit Leadership and Management*. Edited by Robert Herman and Associates. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), p. 138.

Robert Herman and Dick Heimovics, *Executive Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations: New Strategies for Shaping Executive-Board Dynamics*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991), pp. 53-66.

- **Give information for decision-making.** The executive director should give detailed regular written reports to the board and should ensure that information and presentations brought to board meetings are concise, timely, and appropriate. The executive director should provide information needed for decision-making and not waste the board's time with unnecessary information.
- **Organize work processes and structures.** Keeping the board organized in its work may include: reviewing the agenda with the chair, sending information in advance of meetings, keeping minutes and attendance if asked, updating missing board members, providing administrative support to committee work, overseeing committee work to ensure no duplication, and ensuring there is an annual schedule of board meetings and committee meetings in consultation with the board chair. Through debriefing and coaching, help the board chair run effective meetings.
- **Clarify board roles and responsibilities.** Help board members understand their roles and responsibilities as a whole board and ensure that individual board members understand their responsibilities as board members. Ensure that the board is clear about organizational goals as well as board work plans and committee terms of reference for the year. Encourage board members by recognizing their achievements. Ensure that assignments to individual board members are clear.
- **Monitor and evaluate the board.** Ensure that the board has a method or process of self-evaluation, help it carry this out, and discuss results informally with it. Help the board develop standards and ensure that the board chair follows through with individual board members to ensure that their assignments are completed. Ensure that committee work is reported back at board meetings.¹²

Interview Results

Interview participants were reminded that the executive director in his/her organization may or may not provide all the kinds of support described in the literature. They were then asked to identify the kind of support that, in their organization, was most useful in

creating an effective relationship between the executive director and the board of directors. Interview participants felt that all the above types of executive director support to the board were important to having an effective relationship except the executive director assisting the board with self-evaluation. Board chairs interviewed believed this was strictly a board function while all but one executive director said that their board had not yet done any self-evaluations.

Giving Information

The one area most commonly identified, by both board chairs and executive directors, as the most important support for building an effective relationship was the executive director providing information used for decision-making. According to the interview participants, this takes several forms including:

- for the board meeting—regular detailed written reports
- in between board meetings—regular e-mails to update or bounce ideas
- at the board's request—special information packages.

With the first two, interview participants indicated that these are completed and sent at the initiative of the executive director. That is, no one requests on a regular basis, but the executive director knows what information the board needs. In addition, board chairs felt that executive directors must balance what is enough information versus what constitutes information overload for

¹² Adams, *Executive Director-Board Relationships: The Key to an Organization's Success*. Alberta Healthcare Association, "Board/CEO Relations," *Folio* 5, pp. 3-4. Axelrod, *The Chief Executive's Role in Developing the Nonprofit Board*, pp. 126-35. CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, "Board Model for Governance and Support: Part Two," *Board Café*, August 18, 2003. http://www.uwex.edu/learner/bib_board.htm. Herman and Heimovics, "Executive Leadership," in *The Jossey-Bass Handbook of Nonprofit Leadership and Management*. Edited by Robert Herman and Associates, pp. 114-21. Herman and Heimovics, *Executive Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations: New Strategies for Shaping Executive-Board Dynamics*, pp. 57-66. Robinson, "Working Partnership: The Executive Director and the Board," pp. 114-21.

board members. Executive directors said that they tend to give too much information rather than too little. The term “conduit” was frequently used to describe the executive director’s role in providing information to the board of directors. In other words, the executive director channels information and thinking on principles, ideas, and programming.

While boards sometimes request special information, interviewees indicated that usually executive directors are expected to anticipate board needs and questions around a particular issue. Both parties had the understanding that, if the executive director did not have written information prepared, at the very least s/he should have the information in his/her head in order to speak to the subject at the board meeting. Several executive directors mentioned that, in giving information, they often give two or three scenarios with risks and their recommendation on the decision. They felt it was important that they be able to articulate the information verbally and be able to “sell” a recommendation to the board.

It was also important that the executive director and staff be positioned as pseudo experts living reality daily so that the board can trust the information and recommendations they make. One executive director cautioned that an executive director needs self-confidence to take this approach because the board may not take the executive director’s recommendation or may abdicate its responsibility and take the recommendation without exploring others. In addition, some interview participants felt that the executive director must remember that it is the board that takes the financial/political risk so the executive director must not be too cavalier about decision-making information required. In one organization, if only one board member feels that there is a lack of information, then the chair says, “Is your comfort level with the info enough to allow you to vote? No? Then abstain from the vote because we have to move on in this meeting.” Besides pointing to the need for superior chairing skills, this reinforces the importance of the executive director providing appropriate and relevant information so that most board members are comfortable making decisions.

By providing adequate information to the board of directors, the executive director helps create feelings of trust and appreciation

from the board as well as less personal frustration. Interview participants said the relationship benefited from:

- **Increased trust.** When the executive director consistently shares adequate and useful information, it shows s/he trusts the board to use the information appropriately in decision-making. This also increases the board's trust in the executive director, because the board does not feel that anything is being hidden or that it is being protected from "bad news." In addition, the board members believe that they receive the right information at the right time—which increases their comfort level with decision-making. This, in turn, increases their appreciation of the executive director for giving them what's necessary to do their job.
- **Increased appreciation.** The board appreciates the executive director giving detailed information in reports because then, at the board meetings, it can focus on the bigger picture rather than details. This, in turn, makes meetings more meaningful. The board also appreciates being well prepared for discussions, public presentations, or questions from community members. Board members' trust in the executive director increases when s/he gives them materials that make them look credible.
- **Decreased frustration for the executive director.** Sharing information with all the board means less aggravation because individual board members will not be inclined to phone the executive director to ask for more information.

Board Orientation and Education

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Most organizations interviewed have an orientation package prepared by the executive director as well as an annual orientation session for new board members that, in all cases, was organized by the executive director and delivered by either the executive director alone or in conjunction with the board chair. In addition, some executive directors liked to meet new board members individually to educate them about the organization, their role, expectations, and executive director needs. Interview participants felt it was important that the executive director support the board in these ways because as one chair said, "The executive director manages all the

relationships, and the executive director has the history, objectives, constraints, and so on that board members need to understand the organization.”

Some organizations include ongoing education as part of the board meeting either as a formal agenda item or as part of the executive director’s report (i.e., making comments that helps to educate board members about the organization).

Interviews showed that, when the executive director is active in board orientation and education, the relationship benefits because:

- Both parties understand each other better as people (as opposed to their positions) and each other’s needs and interests. This leads to increased mutual respect.
- The board develops more trust of and appreciation for the executive director. Because board members are properly oriented and continually educated, they feel like they are in the inner circle.
- The board knows its role and expectations and is continually reminded so that it is less likely to micromanage. This increases the executive director’s trust in the board of directors.

Working Processes and Structures

Although executive directors are not specifically asked to help keep boards organized in their work, executive directors do so because it seems to help themselves as well as the board.

Interview results indicate that types of support typically include: staying informed of all committee activities, helping committees organize their work, helping establish the board’s committee structure, and keeping information flowing around the organization about committee work. The executive director, in essence, is the “information central” distribution point for the board’s work.

In addition to committee support, some executive directors also provide administrative support by creating a draft board meeting agenda for discussion with the chair or executive committee, taking minutes, and keeping absentee board members informed. The third strategy listed by interview participants was for executive directors

to give their board members “tools” to be ambassadors for the organizations (for example, identification pins, business cards, pens to give away, etc.)

When the executive director supports working processes and structures, both parties experience less frustration. The executive director’s involvement in keeping information flowing helps keep roles clarified on an ongoing basis so each party thinks the other is working appropriately.

Board Recruitment

Views ranged widely on the degree to which executive directors should support the board with recruitment and what the impact on the relationship might be. Some interview participants, including board members, felt that the executive director plays a key role because s/he is good with people, is a good judge of character, understands the organization’s business needs, and knows what kind of people can best support the organization. Others supported this view because their executive director “travels in different circles than the board has access to” and “knows the community so should be able to engage people.” One executive director acknowledged that the executive director’s involvement in board recruitment could be a sensitive area and that s/he was involved to a greater extent than many other executive directors. At the same time, s/he knew that the board trusted his/her interests were for the organization and not for herself/himself. S/he went on to say, “Both the board and executive director need to realize that it is the board that makes or breaks the organization. So, it’s worth your time to spend making sure you’ve recruited the right people.” Executive directors’ involvement included helping develop the process, suggesting names, helping identify gaps on the current board, and interviewing.

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A small minority of others held an opposing view that executive directors should stay completely out of recruitment, that they “have to play with the cards they’re dealt,” and executive directors should trust their boards to recruit the right people.

Board Support to the Executive Director

While the board can support the executive director in several ways, interview participants identified actions that assisted the relationship the most. Again, these actions were done for the good of the organization but had the spin-off benefit of increasing good feelings between the parties, thereby leading to an effective relationship.

Literature

The literature suggests seven key strategies the board can employ to support the executive director. They are quite different from the support they can receive from the executive director as described earlier in this section.

- **Support fundraising.** The premise is that the board would support any major organizational functions such as strategic planning, financial oversight, and so on but most of the literature singles out fundraising as a key area where the board can support initiatives started by staff.
- **Offer individuals as sounding boards.** The board members make themselves available to the executive director if the executive director seeks their advice or thoughts based on their individual areas of expertise. The caveat here is that the board member's advice must be sought rather than the board member giving unsolicited advice to the executive director on operational areas which executive directors construe to be micromanaging and which, consequently, damages the relationship.
- **Provide emotional support while monitoring and ensuring the personal well-being of the executive director.** The literature suggests that the board of directors must demonstrate a commitment to employees by showing care about the executive director's personal well-being. The literature identifies several ways in which the board can do this, including:

- encouraging the executive director to balance job demands with personal time
 - showing sensitivity to the executive director's family situation and personal needs
 - ensuring that job demands are reasonable and provide monetary compensation or time off for overtime hours worked
 - actively monitoring the executive director's job satisfaction (including levels of fatigue, stress, frustration, etc.) and encouraging personal leave for renewal.
- **Encourage appropriate professional leave.** The board of directors can support the executive director in his/her professional development choices.
 - **Give authority.** The literature suggests that it is necessary for the board to delegate authority to the executive director in order for the executive director to do the job. In addition, when a board member oversteps authority or misunderstands roles (micromanage for example), the executive director must feel board support when intervening and correcting the board member's actions.
 - **Provide connections to the community.** This would include potential donors, people of political influence, other community leaders and so on.
 - **Provide infrastructure.** The executive director must have the tools necessary to do his/her job (for example, a computer and appropriate work space).¹³

¹³ Alberta Healthcare Association. "Board/CEO Relations," *Folio 5* (1992), p. 3. Adams, *Executive Director-Board Relationships: The Key to an Organization's Success*. Axelrod, "Board Leadership and Board Development," pp. 121-22. CompassPoint Nonprofit Services. "Board Model for Governance and Support: Part One," *Board Café*, July 22, 2003, p. 111. Howe, *The Nonprofit Leadership Team: Building the Board-Executive Director Partnership*, pp. 25, 45-48. Richard T. Ingram, *Ten Basic Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards* (Washington, D.C.: Board Source, 2003), p. 3. Jan Masaoka, "Support Your Local Executive Director," *Board Café*, June 26, 2002). Available: <http://www.compasspoint.org/>.

Interview Results

It is useful here to reiterate that, even if their organization's board were effective in all the areas the literature suggests, interview participants had to identify the *areas that impact the relationship the most*. In this study, interview participants agreed that two types of board support were most important to developing a good relationship between the two parties. The two areas of support identified most often as being important to the relationship were:

- individual board members acting as a sounding board
- the board giving authority to the executive director.

Directors as Sounding Board

Most organizations interviewed seemed to view board members as wearing two hats: that of a board member responsible for governing and that of a community member with expertise or experience in a particular area. Executive directors frequently access individual board members for expertise or to link them to the necessary expertise in the community. In the case of smaller organizations, the expertise sought is more related to day-to-day operational matters such as human resources or marketing because, as one executive director said, "I don't have staff in those areas. I'm it." Often, executive directors utilize individual board members to "bounce ideas off of" by asking questions such as "what would you think if we made our presentation this way?" This type of information-exchange also extends to founding board members who, in the case of a newer organization, keep the executive director grounded in the original vision for the organization and whether or not new opportunities fit with that.

Interview participants were also asked whether any concrete actions were taken by either party to ensure this type of support is offered to the executive director. Results suggest that executive directors usually know where the expertise is on their boards and they do not need to be encouraged to access it. The executive director takes the initiative and contacts the appropriate person who can help and, in some cases, develops a pool of "favorites" to call for opinions and suggestions when necessary.

It appears that this type of support positively influences how both parties feel about each other. In board members, it fosters a sense of inclusion and appreciation that the executive director respects their knowledge enough to consult with them. For executive directors, it decreases their feelings of isolation in that they feel some of the board members, if not all, understand the nature of the executive directors' job and what they do. In addition, the executive director can feel supported because the board's expertise gives the executive director the credibility of having community support.

Board Authority to Executive Director

The second area identified as important to the relationship is that the board gives authority to the executive director necessary to do the job. As one executive director put it, "They leave me alone to do my job." The executive director needs a comfort level in making operational decisions without constantly having to check back for board approval.

According to interview participants, a few key actions can be taken to ensure that the executive director feels that authority is secure. First, from time to time, in an organization with an effective relationship, a board member will have to stop discussion at a board meeting to say that the board needs to let the executive director do something and simply report back to the board on it rather than the board making decisions on the item. In one organization, there are guidelines for this written in the form of a checklist that outlines the day-to-day operations under the executive director's authority. Other interview participants felt that the executive director must earn authority and the board's trust to give that authority by "delivering on the deliverables." And, third, the most critical action for creating a good relationship is that, when a board member tries to have authority in inappropriate areas of operations (i.e., micromanaging), the rest of the board or the board chair must address this behavior and stop it. As one executive director put it succinctly, "Otherwise, the executive director will be speaking Oscar Wilde's reported final words 'either that wallpaper goes or I do.'"

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No well-meaning executive director or board ever wants the relationship to deteriorate to the point where it is irretrievable and ultimatums are given. When the board supports the executive

director by giving authority to do the job, it is important that the board accept its limitations in directly supervising operations. Not micromanaging tells the executive director that the board trusts her/him—which reduces the executive director’s fear, stress, and frustration, thereby leading to a more positive relationship with the board. More than one board chair noted that, if the executive director’s competence decreases, the board is more inclined to take away authority, micromanage, and get involved in operations because the trust or confidence has been broken.

Executive Director and Board Chair Relationship

Of all the board members, the chair has the most frequent contact with the executive director. The literature and the interview results support the notion that the nature of the board chair/ executive director relationship can significantly influence the overall relationship between the executive director and the board of directors.

Literature

The literature identifies several aspects of this relationship that can potentially influence the relationship between the executive director and the board as a whole. Principles or strategies found in the literature include:

- Both the executive director and the board chair work on and invest in the relationship. They both adapt to and cultivate the working relationship.
- The board chair and executive director make themselves available to each other, and they communicate regularly, although not necessarily face-to-face.
- The executive director consults with the board chair on how to present something to the board.
- The executive director and board chair present a united front to the public and the rest of the board and resolve their differences in private.

- The board chair and executive director both appreciate the ambiguity in both leadership positions.
- The executive director accommodates the different working styles of various chairs, and the board chairs appreciate that the executive director does this.
- The executive director and board chair each build on the strengths of the other.
- When a new board chair starts, the board chair and executive director meet to establish ways they will work together and expectations of their working relationship.
- The board chair and executive director share power.¹⁴

Interview Results

Some interview participants suggested that, if the parties were working on and investing in the relationship (Strategy One above), they would have to be employing many other strategies listed. Interview participants gave examples of what tells them that the other party is investing in the relationship:

- Frequent communication occurs.
- The chair asks the executive director, “Am I doing okay? Am I missing anything?” and the executive director gives honest, useful feedback.
- The board makes an effort to put resources towards the organization’s mission.
- The board and executive director mutually caring about each other.
- The chair has clear expectations for process and sets an example for the rest of the board.

¹⁴ Axelrod, *The Chief Executive’s Role in Developing the Nonprofit Board*, p. 3. Gale, *Leadership Roles in Nonprofit Governance*, pp. 6, 11. Howe, *The Nonprofit Leadership Team: Building the Board-Executive Director Partnership*, pp. 14, 17, 18, 34. Robinson, “Working Partnership: The Executive Director and the Board,” pp. 115-17. Carol Weisman, “Why You Need a Prenuptial Agreement: Advice to the President and Executive Director,” *Nonprofit World* Volume 13, Number 1 (January/February 1995). Available: http://www.uwex.edu/li/learner/bib_board.htm.

Of the other eight strategies suggested in the literature, the most important one according to interview participants was the regularity of communication (Strategy Two). The interview participants were quick to point out that face-to-face meetings were unnecessary. In most cases, the executive director and chair met face-to-face once a month, sometimes to review the board meeting agenda and, more often by phone, to have “off the record” conversations. More importantly, they were in contact by e-mail and telephone typically a couple of times a week. The nature of the contact was often for the executive director to update the chair with more details than the board would get or to consult with the chair about how to present something to the board (Strategy Three). Several interview participants mentioned that contact between the chair and executive director was not always about the organization but was sometimes of a more personal nature (i.e., chair venting about the frustrations in the work week, discussing the health of the family pet, and so on). In addition, some interview participants stated that they consulted more with the executive committee on agenda items than strictly with the chair. This related to comments that the chair and executive director discuss anything contentious in private before the board meeting or “presenting a united front” as the literature termed it (Strategy Four). If a new suggestion comes up during the board meeting, the discussion is staged more like a brainstorming session than disagreement with opposing points of view. Only one organization indicated that the executive director and board chair openly disagree (sometimes heatedly) at board meetings; the board chair acknowledged that this made some board members uncomfortable.

Two organizations discussed what the chair hoped to accomplish during his/her term, clarifying organizational goals, funding direction, and the year’s programs. All seven organizations, however, reported few concrete actions or discussion by board and executive director to establish ways of working (Strategy Eight), including the frequency and type of communication. Rather, it was usually more a product of the executive director learning and adapting to the chair’s working style (the first half of Strategy Six), including frequency of contact. Executive directors noted that they know the person who is going to be chair before the person fills that role so the executive director, ideally, already knows something about the chair’s working style. Most executive directors felt that

the board chairs do not fully appreciate the adjustments that the executive director must make every time a new chair is elected (the second half of Strategy Six), in particular the variation in the availability of the chairs depending on their line of work or retirement status. Availability of the chair for the executive director to bounce ideas around with seemed critical to the relationship's success, and one-day turnaround for a chair's response to communication seemed to be the norm. As one executive director said, "The quick response of the chair makes me feel like they're in my corner."

Strategy Nine suggests that the executive director and board chair share power, thereby contributing to an effective relationship. But interview participants shared an aversion to the term "power." One executive director frames the construct that, while s/he views the relationship with the chair as a partnership, it is not sharing power. S/he construed that the chair has responsibility to the board and power over the executive director. The executive director has power over the staff and responsibility to the chair, the board, and the sector. Another executive director stated that either the chair or executive director thinking they have power could really undermine the organization's goals and objectives and the whole relationship between board and executive director. In his/her organization, there is no sense of shared power. It is more a shared sense of getting behind the goals and achieving them. Power has never come up; the board and executive director work "equitably" around the goals and stay clear of "personal power." This sentiment was echoed by others who said that "teamwork" and "walk side by side" was more in line with how people viewed the relationship between the chair and executive director as well as the executive director and board. As one chair succinctly stated, "The board knows that, if they come up with an objection, I'm not going to cave in. Because if they're able to get me to fall, then they'll have (the executive director) to contend with." S/he went on to explain, "On this team, you play your position because that's what we bring to this team. And if you don't play your position and somebody else has to go in, then their position is under covered and we get scored on. We don't say we lose the game, we just get scored on. So that's how our board operates." One chair has never thought of the relationship with the executive director in the context of power because "there's no political context for discussions. Everything is focused on the mission of the organization."

There is a circular cause and effect pattern created by the chair/ executive director relationship. The executive director and chair trust and respect each other, which allow them to work together as equals. Working together as equals generates more trust and respect for each other and results in:

- increased appreciation between the chair and executive director. Frequent contact by phone or e-mail from the executive director and quick response by the board chair tells each party that the other is making an effort and investing in the relationship.
- increased trust and board comfort level that business is being handled.
- having the basis for a functional organization—which is impossible when the chair and the executive director do not get along.
- increased mutual respect, trust, appreciation, and even friendship resulting from an attitude of teamwork/partnership.
- increased respect generated from hearing each other's perspectives.
- smoother board meetings and therefore less frustration because the executive director and chair have discussed agenda items in advance and are working together on them.

Reciprocal Behaviours Create a Positive Climate

In the literature, three key areas of behavior can affect organizational culture in terms of the quality of relationships: the manner in which disagreements are expressed, the nature of the partnership, and the nature of ongoing communication. These help to create trust, respect, and appreciation, and they are critical to organizational effectiveness.

Constructive Disagreement

Literature

The literature generally agrees on what constitutes a constructive expression of disagreement:

- Differences of opinion are encouraged as a means to obtaining the best decision or solution.
- People speak their minds with respectful words and tone.
- An open and trusting climate exists at board meetings so debate is unguarded.
- An “unapologetic accountability” enables individuals to be comfortable calling each other on actions and behavior that do not demonstrate a commitment to a collectively made decision. In other words, things perceived as problems are promptly and openly confronted and not left to fester.¹⁵

Interview Results

How disagreements are handled or seen by others and how differences of opinion are expressed at board meetings significantly influences the nature of the board/executive director relationship. Interview participants used the words “proper decorum,” “respectful discussion,” and “leaving dignity intact” to describe the desirable way for discussion and disagreements to take place at the board meeting whether they are between board members or between board member(s) and the executive director. For this type of positive, effective culture for discussions and disagreements to evolve and continue, interview participants identified the key determinant as the board chair’s chairing and facilitation skills. The chair’s ability, it seems, helps determine the success of the relationship the executive director will have with the board as a whole. Some ways that a chair can positively influence the nature

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¹⁵ Gale, *Leadership Roles in Nonprofit Governance*, p. 12.
Lencioni, “The Trouble with Teamwork.”
Paula J. MacLean, *Great Boards: Plain and Simple* (Edmonton: Silver Creek Press, 2003), p. 55.
Robinson, “Working Partnership: The Executive Director and the Board,” p. 116.

of board discussions, particularly when there are disagreements, as suggested by interview participants, follow:

- Chair uses a four-point method: what are the facts, what are the reasons for it, judgment (what do you *think* about it?), and emotion (what do I *feel* about it?).
- Chair uses “mini-solutions” to move discussion along. When discussion becomes circular, the chair summarizes important points and suggests that the executive director work on it and bring it back to the next board meeting.
- If discussion heats up, the chair defers the discussion to a committee for a cooling-off period.
- When the chair sees that some people are dominating the discussion and others are holding back or not getting the opportunity to speak, s/he ensures that everyone has the opportunity to speak including the executive director.
- Chair keeps the discussion and decision-making focused on the organization’s core values by returning to the question, “How does this fit with our mission?”
- Chair re-positions disagreements to be “free flow” or brainstorming of ideas.
- Chair steers the conversation back onto topic if someone throws an unrelated “red herring” into the discussion. However, one interview participant gave the proviso that “sometimes a passive, non-participative board member says something ‘out of left field,’ and you’re so glad they said anything at all that you encourage them instead of stopping them.” This points to the chair’s challenge in balancing people’s need to feel heard with getting through the agenda in a timely manner.

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The chair’s role, while challenging at times, is critical to increasing the comfort level of both the executive director and the board of directors in expressing differences of opinion. By the chair successfully redirecting off-topic discussion, bringing discussions to a close, and ensuring that all are heard, the executive director is taken off the hot seat and can participate fully in the discussions.

Having outlined that the chair’s skills are critical, it is also important to recognize that the responsibility for a positive

climate for disagreement does not rest solely with the chair. The executive director also bears some responsibility for influencing the relationship by having the appropriate attitude towards the expression of opposing opinions and by discussing with the chair or executive committee how to present certain items to the board, what information to bring to increase their comfort level with decision-making, and so on. Like board members, the executive director must view disagreements as positive in that getting diverse perspectives will lead to the best solution or decision. For example, if the differences are expressed respectfully, defensiveness by the executive director decreases the board's trust and confidence that the executive director will accept the board's decision and present it appropriately to staff. When there is disagreement, rather than becoming defensive, the executive director must proactively ask questions of the board members and occasionally change perspective about a report or recommendation based on board feedback. Actively seeking the board's input benefits the relationship, because board members feel appreciated and respected for their contributions. As one executive director said, "Disagreements are a win-win because we all get more ideas and potentially a better decision, board members feel appreciated, and I am comforted in knowing that the board is not passive but engaged and cares about the organization."

Board/Executive Director Partnership

Literature

42 Much of the literature describes partnership as having qualities such as total trust, mutual appreciation, and respect especially during times of disagreement. The literature also refers to the need for open and transparent communication, a willingness to listen, principled actions, and rapport.¹⁶ Different authors use various terms to describe the executive director/board partnership including: team of equals, shared leadership, dual authority, and interdependence.¹⁷

¹⁶ MacLean, *Great Boards: Plain and Simple*, pp. 20, 55.

Howe, *The Nonprofit Leadership Team: Building the Board-Executive Director Partnership*, pp. 1, 23.

¹⁷ Fern E. Koch, "Building a Strong Board-Executive Director Relationship," *Secrets of Successful Boards: the Best from the Nonprofit Pros*. Edited by Carol E. Weisman. (St. Louis: F.E. Robbins and Sons, 1998), pp. 137-38.

Maureen Robinson describes the partnership like a tango requiring clear though sometimes subtle communication. As with the tango, originality plays a role while, at the same time, conventions, traditions, and agreements must be honored. She goes on to say that the partners must have a strong sense of balance and be willing to follow as well as lead. Robinson also believes that the key to a successful relationship is the care with which the executive director helps the board to be a good partner.¹⁸ Others believe that the key to establishing a solid partnership is recognizing what the executive director and board can do to support each other in working towards the common goal.

Interview Results

Interview participants view the board/executive director relationship as a partnership even though, as described later in this chapter, some were uncomfortable with the term “equal power” as a descriptor of partnership. Rather, interview participants tended to view the working partnership in practical terms defined by one of three things:

- Both parties have the same feelings about the relationship.
- Both parties have the same feelings about the organization.
- Both parties undertake activities jointly towards common organizational goals.

“Partnership has to be nurtured. It’s like a marriage. You give; you take. You say thank you. Show appreciation. You respect the individual for who they are. It’s that long-term relationship. Are we doing what’s right?” So says one executive director who views the relationship with his/her board as a partnership. Another executive director also sees the relationship as a partnership in light of the feelings that the parties have for each other. For example, they feel a comfort level in calling each other just to connect and by “drawing things out” from each other. These interview participants view partnership in terms of how the people relate and act towards each other.

¹⁸ Robinson, “Working Partnership: The Executive Director and the Board,” p. 113.

Other interview participants viewed the relationship philosophically as a partnership in the sense that both the executive director and board are working towards a common end, and both feel they have a real stake in the organization and its programming. Most board chairs spoke about the fact that their executive directors made a point to promote this concept of board ownership, which for the board members then translated into partnership of ownership and operations.

Others articulated the nature of their partnership, not in a philosophical sense but a practical one, in terms of concrete things the parties do to move the organization forward. Examples given included jointly determining what to do if a board member has missed too many meetings, how to make a presentation to a funder, and so forth. As one board chair pointed out, “The executive director and board members have to both lead and follow even though sometimes you don’t know which one you’re doing.”

Some interview participants again raised the question of whether equal power must exist in order for partnership to result—but in the context of whether or not the board and executive director view their relationship as a partnership. As mentioned earlier with respect to executive director/board chair relationships, some executive directors interviewed were uncomfortable with the term “equal power” in relation to the partnership and felt that “teamwork” and “shared leadership” more fittingly described the equitable nature of the relationship between themselves and the board of directors.

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In one organization, the chair believes shared power and control are balanced between the executive director and the board of directors, but the partnership is not truly equal because the executive director makes it very clear that s/he works for the board. However, in day-to-day operations, it is a partnership in that both parties are trying to get the organization’s work done.

In one of the newer organizations interviewed, the chair and executive director agreed (in separate interviews) that the board does not share power with the executive director. In fact, the executive director has most of it. It is part of evolving as a new organization, they said, and also the danger of having a competent executive director is that the board becomes dependent instead of becoming an equal partner. The

executive director felt that, while the board is legally responsible, both parties share equal responsibility for the organization's well-being, and the executive director *feels* more accountable than s/he believes the board does. In another newer organization, the executive director also felt an unequal partnership exists because, while the board has delegated authority to the executive director, the responsibility rests with it. S/he believed that "teamwork" was present in some aspects of the organization (for example, fundraising), but that this did not translate into an equal partnership between the two parties.

Meaningful Communication

"Executive Director and Board Chair Relationship" in Chapter Three discussed the regularity of communication between those two parties and its impact on their relationship. The next chapter focuses on all aspects of communication between the board and executive director: frequency, type of information communicated at and between board meetings, amount of information provided, and level of detail in the information.

Literature

The literature suggests that more effective communication between the board and the executive director could be created and have a positive impact on the relationship if:

- Communication is open and transparent.
- Each party listens to the other.
- There are no surprises.
- Communication is a minimum of once a week.
- Both good and bad news is shared.¹⁹

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¹⁹ Alberta Healthcare Association, "Board/CEO Relations," pp. 2-3.
Gale, *Leadership Roles in Nonprofit Governance*, pp. ix, 6.
Herman and Heimovics, *Executive Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations: New Strategies for Shaping Executive-Board Dynamics*, p. 65.
Hesselbein, "The Indispensable Partnership."
Howe, *The Nonprofit Leadership Team: Building the Board-Executive Director Partnership*, pp. 17, 82, 168.
Koch, "Building a Strong Board-Executive Director Relationship," p. 145.
MacLean, *Great Boards: Plain and Simple*, p. 55.
Robinson, "Working Partnership: The Executive Director and the Board," pp. 116-17.

Interview Results

Interview participants used terms like “transparent, honest, truthful, and open” to describe the type of communication that exists between the executive director and the board of directors in their organizations. When asked what “transparent” or “honest” communication looks like in the organization, one board chair indicated that the executive director “lays everything on the table, even their emotions.” The executive director does not “color” anything, which leads to open, respectful, very matter-of-fact discussion. This leads to people not taking anything personally. Another chair echoed these sentiments with his/her comments that the executive director’s communicates frequently and is clear about its purpose (i.e., just to give the board information or asking for input). This executive director also expresses emotion, particularly at times when s/he does not feel supported by the board of directors in the ways that s/he needs. This executive director believes that effective communication is “just like any other marriage or relationship. All the cards have to be on the table”—meaning both information about the organization as well as personal feelings about the relationship.

While board members interviewed agree that they gain trust when they have “no surprises,” it was important to distinguish between hiding things versus managing things alone when the board’s help is not needed. Most executive directors interviewed share good and bad news about operations, but with the caveat that they already have analyzed bad news before presenting it to their boards. Typically, bad news is presented in the context of “here’s the facts, here’s what we (staff) are doing about it.” All executive directors discuss with their board chair or executive committee how to present information to the board and, typically, information is shaped so that blame is unassigned and a recommendation is presented in conjunction with the news. One executive director does not share *all* good and bad news, because things change so rapidly that s/he says s/he has to pick priorities to share with the board. Others felt that it was important to share everything so that the board is comfortable in feeling that it receives all relevant information.

Communication between board meetings, it was noted, seems as important as that which happens at the meeting. In a smaller organization, the executive director and chair agreed that board members should communicate through the board chair if they need something from the executive director. The board chair communicated this request to the rest of the board members and explained that the executive director had too little time to respond to all information requests. In fact, the executive director in the organization said, “Effective communication is not inundating the executive director with a ton of stuff that s/he may or may not be able to respond to.” Most other executive directors, however, gave frequent e-mail updates to board members between meetings—which, consequently, limited the number of individual queries they received.

Whether or not board members talk directly with staff did not seem to influence the board/executive director relationship negatively so long as the communication that did take place was information-seeking only. Only one executive director wished to be the conduit of contact between board and staff, while the other executive directors encouraged direct contact between board members and staff.

Summary

This section outlines four practices that contribute to an effective relationship between the board of directors and executive director.

In the first practice discussed, executive director support to the board of directors, the most important impact on the relationship is the amount, quality, and frequency of information given by the executive director. Leading board orientation and education, as well as giving administrative support to the board’s working structures, also were identified as important, to a lesser degree, and fall under the information-giving umbrella. That is, the executive director shares information while orienting the board and providing ongoing education. Similarly, the executive director provides information when ensuring that board committees do not duplicate one another’s work and in helping committees define their work. The result of adequate information-sharing, defined as giving too much

rather than too little, is three-fold. Clear roles are maintained, the board will micromanage less and the executive director will be less frustrated. The board trust in the executive director will increase, because board members do not feel that information is being hidden from them. The board will appreciate the executive director for helping it do its volunteer job well.

The second practice discussed was board support to the executive director. Interview participants cited two key types of board support that positively influence the relationship: individuals acting as a sounding board for the executive director and the board of directors as a whole giving the executive director authority. In the first instance, the board members feel appreciated and respected to be asked for their opinions. In the second, the executive director experiences less fear, stress, and frustration because of feeling that the board trusts him/her enough to give the authority necessary to do the job rather than micromanaging.

It was also noted that board members provide links to the community that allow an executive director to help the organization grow. In some organizations, board members are told during the recruitment process that they will be expected to provide donor names. However, in most organizations, expectations of providing general linkages for expertise were less clearly explained during recruitment. Ideally, the board should want the executive director to rely on board members to represent the organization adequately to the community at large. This, in turn, builds appreciation among board members, because they feel worthwhile doing something tangible for the organization. It also increases the executive director's trust has in the board, because the executive director can see the value that board members bring to the organization.

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Third, the board chair/executive director relationship tremendously influences the board's relationship with the executive director and sets the tone for the working relationship with the board. If the board chair and executive director genuinely care about each other and invest in their relationship, they likely do numerous things. The most important, according to interview participants, was the regularity and nature of the communication between them. This includes consulting on how to present something to the board, not disagreeing in front of the board, and being in contact

frequently even if not about “business.” Establishing expectations for communication and ways of work was done proactively in only one organization. In all others, the nature and frequency of the communication was a result of the executive director adjusting to the working style of each new chair—something executive directors felt was not fully appreciated by their board chairs. In terms of whether the executive director and board chair share power, the terms “equals, partners, and teams” arose as more representative of the type of relationship that existed. Working together as partners means focusing everything on achieving the mission, so the question of who had power or how much was typically never discussed or even thought of.

Fourth, having a positive and constructive climate was identified as being key to an effective relationship between the board of directors and executive director. A positive climate was more likely to be present when disagreements are handled constructively, communication is effective and adequate, and the two parties view at least elements of their relationship as a partnership. In the first instance, disagreements were managed respectfully and even encouraged as beneficial in achieving the best possible solution for the organization. One chair described it this way, “Disagreements are a muscle that is used if the organization is going to weather the storms of the 21st century—the wars of pestilence—name all the horses that can ride upon your organization. Some of the disagreements should penetrate our perceptions of who we are.” Interview participants all referred to discussions or disagreements taking place respectfully and leaving the dignity of all parties intact. The chair’s role is critical in ensuring that discussions stay respectful, that they are focused on the mission, and that everyone is heard. At the same time, the executive director must remain non-defensive if questions are asked respectfully and remember that, as the entity legally responsible for the organization, the board has the right to ask questions.

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Viewing the board/executive director relationship as a type of partnership also figured prominently in interview participants’ minds as being key to creating a positive climate, ensuring organizational effectiveness, and, ultimately, assisting the relationship. Rather than being viewed as a sharing of power, the perception of the partnership tended to fit more with Dee Hock’s

in *The Art of Chaordic Leadership*, “I am as great to me as you are to you, therefore we are equal.”²⁰ It is a partnership in the philosophical sense, because both parties feel the same way about each other and about the organization, and in a practical sense because all work is towards the same goals and is, in some cases, being conducted jointly by staff and board members. Working from a mindset of partners builds trust and respect between the parties as well as appreciation of what each brings to the task of ensuring an effective organization. These feelings of course lend themselves to maintaining an effective relationship between the executive director and the board of directors.

Finally, meaningful communication was identified as important to creating a positive climate conducive to organizational effectiveness and an effective relationship. Ideally, the executive director communicates to the board at least once a week; it can be by e-mail and can reflect simple updates on a particular issue or the organization as a whole. Keeping information flowing builds trust that nothing is being hidden and appreciation for the effort made to keep people informed.

All these practices help the relationship by creating the feelings of mutual trust, respect, and appreciation discussed in Chapter Two and by ensuring the organizational effectiveness discussed in Chapter Four.

²⁰ Hock, “The Art of Chaordic Leadership.”

Chapter Four

Organizational Effectiveness Helps the Relationship

Interview participants reflected earlier on how every effective relationship is founded on mutual trust, respect, and appreciation (Chapter Two). They then discussed practices and behaviors in their organization that help create those foundations and a resulting effective relationship between the executive director and the board of directors (Chapter Three). This research project examined several factors that could affect the relationship, including: executive director and board support to each other, the executive director/board chair relationship, reciprocal behaviors between the executive director and the board, organizational effectiveness, and emotional intelligence. Of all of these factors, most interview participants identified organizational effectiveness (described below) and “Emotional Intelligence” in Chapter Five as the two that had the biggest impact on the relationship in their own organizations between the executive director and board of directors in their organizations.

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Literature

The literature suggests that several areas of organizational effectiveness can have an impact on the relationship between the executive director and the board of directors. They include the following broad areas:

- Both parties have the same understanding of the mission, vision for the future, and organizational goals.
- Both parties agree on which governance model is in use and are clear on expectations for different roles. This is reflected by the board focusing on the big picture instead

of micromanaging operations and is achieved through discussion of areas of agreement and potential conflict, misunderstanding, or confusion.

- Both parties share the same understanding of limits of responsibility and authority. This is reflected by: the board not micromanaging, the board stopping any renegade board member who has overstepped the bounds of individual authority, and committees/task forces not having authority over the executive director.
- Effective working structures and systems include effective meetings, committee structures, ways of working, and a process for setting annual organizational goals.
- Effective board recruitment and orientation exists. This ensures that board members' skill sets and experience are in line with organization needs. Orientation is ongoing and includes educational pieces about program areas and governance topics as well as opportunities for role clarification. Orientation also includes the executive director meeting with each new board member individually to ensure that s/he is assigned tasks in line with interests, individual skill sets, and experience.
- The executive director and board of directors are monitored and evaluated. This includes having a clear and agreed upon process with timeframe, and having a clear job description for the board's one employee, the executive director.²¹

²¹ Alberta Healthcare Association, "Board/CEO Relations," p. 3.
Adams, *Executive Director-Board Relationships: The Key to an Organization's Success*.
Axelrod, "Board Leadership and Board Development," p. 134.
CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, "Board Model for Governance and Support: Part One and Two," n.p.
Gale, *Leadership Roles in Nonprofit Governance*, pp. 1, 6, 9, 19-20.
Herman and Heimovics, *Executive Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations: New Strategies for Shaping Executive-Board Dynamics*, p. 61.
Howe, *The Nonprofit Leadership Team: Building the Board-Executive Director Partnership*, pp. 4, 25-6, 37-8, 46, 81-3, 86.
Koch, "Building a Strong Board-Executive Director Relationship," pp. 139-42.
Masaoka, "Support Your Local Executive Director."
Peters and Wolfred, *Daring to Lead: Nonprofit Executive Directors and Their Work Experiences*, p. 32.
Robinson, "Working Partnership: The Executive Director and the Board," pp. 114, 117-20.

Interview Results

Interview participants rated their organizations high in the area of organizational effectiveness while acknowledging that they were stronger in some practices than others. They then were asked which of the above elements in their organization were *most important to having an effective relationship* between the executive director and the board of directors. The relationship, the two items identified most often as key were:

- The executive director and board of directors have the same understanding of the mission, vision, and organizational goals.
- The executive director and the board of directors agree on which governance model is in use and, therefore, have clear expectations of different roles.

Shared Understanding of Mission, Vision, and Goals

Executive directors most often chose shared understanding of mission, vision, and goals as having the most impact on relationship, while board chairs identified effective working systems and structures as having the greatest impact. Executive directors work with systems and structures daily and may take them for granted. Because they meet only once a month at most, board members see structures and systems as more critical since they depend on them to accomplish their work during and between meetings. In addition, one aggravation described by executive directors can be a board member making new program suggestions not in keeping with the organization's overall mission. Unless the board screens these suggestions, the executive director will look defensive, lazy, or non-compliant in rejecting new program suggestions that do not fit with mission. Executive directors' desire for a shared understanding of mission is wise if it leads to less conflict about program suggestions. This difference in what executive directors and board chairs selected as most important to their relationship points to the challenge of both parties keeping shared mission at the forefront of decisions and discussions instead of being sidetracked by operational details.

In spite of this difference in priority, shared understanding of mission, vision, and goals was identified most often overall as being critical to an effective relationship. As one individual described it, volunteers come to the board with varying agendas and degrees of intelligence. As a result, every board member may not always have 100 per cent the same understanding of the mission, vision, and goals as other board members or the executive director. It takes time to “get everyone on the same page.” In spite of this, all organizations rated their organization high in having a shared understanding most of the time. According to interview participants, a number of things tell executive directors and board chairs whether or not understanding is shared:

- Activities follow the strategic plan, and the board receives regular updates on implementation of the strategic plan.
- Board discussions about current and potential new programs focus on whether a program is relevant to the mission.
- Board meetings are time-efficient with few or no last minute additions to the agenda.
- Individual board members give no negative feedback.
- No “board meeting after the board meeting” occurs.

Interview participants were asked whether either the executive director or the board of directors did anything specific to ensure that a shared understanding of mission, vision, and goals was present.

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It seems that, while some actions are intentional, others develop over time as the comfort level between the two parties increases. For example, many organizations stated that annual orientation sessions, retreats, and monthly educational component of board meetings included key sessions in which mission, vision, and goals were presented and discussed. In fact, the business plans often clearly show the link between the mission, goals, and front line programming. These more orchestrated activities can help to achieve a common understanding of mission, vision, and goals.

In addition to these more orchestrated activities, in organizations with an effective relationship, the comfort level is high enough between the two parties so that at board meetings or in discussions between the executive director and board chair, they ask themselves

such questions as: “How does this program fit with our mission?” “Are we the right organization to do this program?” In one organization, a board member was actually assigned the job of asking the question during board discussions, “How does this fit with our mission?” in case that question was being left out of the discussion. Essentially, this board and executive director monitor themselves to ensure that discussions keep everyone to the same understanding of the mission, vision, and goals. Another organization felt that this type of strategy was unnecessary because a simplified mission statement of less than six words made it more likely that all parties would understand the mission and screen their own comments against the mission.

Interview participants said that being effective as an organization in this area has the following effects on the relationship between the executive director and the board of directors:

- Less frustration and stress exists because everyone knows the direction; and, therefore, no dissonance exists between executive director and board directions.
- The executive director has an increased comfort level in knowing when to make a decision between board meetings and when to take a decision to the board.
- The board has increased trust in the executive director that there will be no “out-of-left-field” programming.
- The executive director is less stressed and, therefore, happier because the board chair has a context in which to cut off discussion at board meetings. Therefore, the executive director does not have to be the “bad guy” or in conflict with a board member.
- The organization has increased productivity and effectiveness because everyone “pulls in the same direction” to get the work done.

Agreement on Governance Model and Clear Roles

Interview participants articulated several ways in which they know there is agreement on the governance model and role expectations, or at least a desire to have such agreement. First, at board meetings, when necessary, there is frank non-confrontational discussion about whose job a particular task is (i.e., board or executive director role). At other times, the chair will end discussion by stating, “That’s operational so we’ll let (the executive director) take care of that,” or the board will tell the executive director to “run with it.” In addition to discussion about who does what, board discussions about programs focus on mission and goals rather than how the organization is run. According to interview participants, all of these things tell the parties whether there is agreement on the governance model in place and clear role expectations for both parties.

In terms of concrete actions, many intentional things done from organization to organization helped to ensure agreement on governance and roles. Several organizations believed it critical to inform and educate board members on this area—particularly the difference in executive director and board roles—at the start including when prospective board members are working on committees before joining the board, during recruitment, and as part of formal orientation. Neither executive directors nor board chairs suggested that executive directors needed education on governance or clarity of roles—leading to the possible conclusion that boards assume, rightly or wrongly, that an executive director knows about governance models while volunteers may not.

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At the time of setting annual organizational goals or writing a business or strategic plan, discussion occurs about who is responsible for implementing the strategies. In addition, as mentioned earlier, a higher comfort level typically exists between the parties in organizations with an effective relationship. This comfort level makes it possible during the pre-board discussion between the board chair and executive director, as well as at board meetings, to clarify whose responsibility an item is. Examples given during the interviews include a board member saying, “Wait a minute. We’re getting into operations now,” or an executive

director saying, “Why don’t you let staff take care of those details and we’ll bring back some options for you to discuss.” The chair’s role at meetings, described in Chapter Three, appears to be critical to successfully gaining and maintaining clear role expectations. The chair needs the confidence and facilitation skills to stop board discussions when they gravitate towards operations instead of the board’s “bigger picture” role. Interview participants gave examples of statements used during board meetings to keep discussion clear on roles. Examples include the chair saying, “If you (the board) are comfortable with this in principle, let’s not wordsmith it,” “Let’s let (the executive director) run with it,” or the war analogy given by an executive director “that’s my responsibility. You (the board) hired me to provide you with advice and recommendations. We (the staff) are in the trenches. We are the ones slugging it out everyday.” Interestingly, interview results show that some board chairs feel it is solely their job to help board members understand their role while others feel it is a joint role between the board chair and executive director. Regardless, all agree that achieving and maintaining this clarity is made much easier when board members come with some previous experience. This may potentially apply more to organizations that belong to smaller sectors with fewer organizations. The volunteer base is small and so, according to interview results, not only are good board members re-circulated from one organization to another, but also executive directors sometimes find themselves sitting on a board of another organization in their sector alongside someone from their own board.

Agreeing on the governance model in use and consequently having clear roles appears to have a significant impact on ensuring an effective relationship between the board of directors and the executive director. Interview participants described the following benefits:

- The board feels an increased comfort level in asking the executive director to do things and in being asked by the executive director to do things. This included frank comments from the board, when necessary, such as “that’s our job” or “that’s your job” to the executive director.
- The executive director feels an increased comfort level because of the security of knowing when to decide and act and when to go to the board of directors for decision.

- Conflict decreases because people are not stepping in one another's way even accidentally and with good intentions. In addition, board members are not interfering (i.e., micromanaging) in things they should not.
- People are under less pressure and meetings are easier due to increased comfort level.
- The right people are doing the right job, creating a more effectively functioning organization.

Summary

Interview participants felt strongly that organizational effectiveness is a key determinant to the effectiveness of the relationship between the executive director and board of directors. In particular, two areas of organizational effectiveness were identified as having the most impact on the relationship: first, the same understanding of mission, vision, and goals; and second, agreement on a governance model and, consequently, a clarity of roles. Having these in place results in a more effective relationship because there is less stress and frustration coupled with more trust and a higher comfort level with each other.

Chapter Five

Leadership Qualities Affect the Relationship

Emotional Intelligence and Self-Awareness

Along with organizational effectiveness, interviewees identified emotional intelligence as the other most important factor in ensuring an effective relationship between the executive director and board of directors. Practices described in Chapter Three and Chapter Four ultimately help create an effectively operating organization, and emotional intelligence helps to implement those strategies successfully. In other words, it is not simply *what* a person does (as outlined in Chapters Three and Four) that influences the relationship, but also *how* s/he does it (emotional intelligence and other leadership qualities).

Literature

According to Goleman's model,²² emotional intelligence consists of the two aspects of Personal Competence (how we manage ourselves) and Social Competence (how we handle relationships). Personal competence includes self-awareness, self-regulation, and motivation skills while social competence includes empathy and social skills. Another research project might examine all these aspects of emotional intelligence in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of how this skill influences our workplace

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²² Daniel Goleman, *Working with Emotional Intelligence* (Toronto: Bantam, 1998), pp. 26-27.

relationships. However, due to time limitations, this research project examined only the self-awareness component of personal competence and the empathy component of social competence to gain a general sense of how important emotional intelligence is to the relationship between the executive director and board of directors.

Self-Awareness

To manage self is the most important responsibility of today's leaders. Managing self means managing one's own integrity, character, ethics, knowledge, wisdom, temperament, words, and acts. In essence, making a better person of self.²³ The literature identified several areas of self-awareness that can have an impact on relationships:

- pausing to reflect upon my values and behaviors and their causes and effects
- being confident in my ability to be successful in my role within the organization
- coping with stress, anxiety, and fatigue
- demonstrating, in my day-to-day behaviors, adherence to my values or ethical standards
- feeling passionate about the organization
- making value-oriented decisions in situations where there is more than one right answer
- being sensitive to how other people feel or to the way in which they are likely to react to me
- having a good idea what other people think and feel about me
- understanding how my personality could affect my working relationships
- adapting my approaches and style to different people and situations.²⁴

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²³ Hock, "The Art of Chaordic Leadership."

²⁴ Goleman, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, p. 114.

Interview Results

Interview participants were asked to choose the two descriptors from the above list that best describe each party and then to rate each party. Participants then reflected on how the level of emotional intelligence in self-awareness influences the effectiveness of their relationships with the other party.

Executive directors, the board chair, and the board as a whole—in each organization—were all described as having confidence in their ability to be successful in their roles within the organization. In addition, boards were described as being able to make values-oriented decisions in situations where more than one right answer exists, and executive directors were typically described as being passionate about the organization. One chair described the importance of self-awareness as, “You have to manage yourself so others don’t have to. Know yourself and control yourself and play your position.” An executive director said, “It’s an energy game. If your organization isn’t working, and people lack self-awareness, eventually you start to feel like ‘I don’t need this anymore.’” Clearly, leaders’ self-awareness levels are fundamental to others’ job satisfaction and to the organization’s effective operation.

Interview participants were asked to rate each party on overall emotional intelligence on a seven-point scale with one being the lowest, and seven being the highest. Executive directors had the highest average rating at 5.8; boards received the lowest rating at 5.1, with board chairs at 5.4. In five of seven organizations, board chairs rated themselves lower than or equal to their boards even though all the executive directors rated their chairs higher than the board as a whole. This is because the variety of individuals on the board makes it difficult to say that, collectively, they have a high level of emotional intelligence even though some obviously do. In addition, the board chairs were overly modest in rating themselves based on their other answers throughout the interview process, which indicated they had a high level of emotional intelligence, and based on how their executive directors rated and gave evidence of their emotional intelligence

Interview participants felt self-awareness critical to having an effective relationship between the executive director and the

board of directors. A number of benefits to the relationship were suggested:

- **increased respect between parties.** Each individual's self-awareness affects how the group functions and how well the group gets along.
- **increased appreciation.** Nobody takes too much glory when the organization is successful.
- **decreased conflict.** Fewer personal agendas come to the table.
- **improved communications and clearer roles.** When the board is more self-aware, confusion about its role declines.
- **improved operations and governance.** When everyone is clear about individual roles and how best to contribute, effectiveness and efficiency improve.
- **increased trust.** The parties feel that they can trust each other and themselves to make the right choices based on organizational goals and mission
- **increased skill set.** This helps both parties ensure that the other feels that s/he is contributing something during his/her stay with the organization.

Social Competence

Literature

Social competence—how we handle relationships with others—is determined by our levels of awareness of others' feelings, needs, and concerns. This includes sensing what people are feeling, being able to see their perspective, cultivating rapport, and being attuned with a broad diversity of people.²⁵ Descriptors of this empathy component of social competence, from the literature, include:

- **understanding others.** This means sensing others' feelings and perspectives and taking an active interest in their concerns. It includes being attentive to emotional cues, active listening, showing sensitivity, and truly understanding others' perspectives, needs, and feelings.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 318.

- **developing others.** This means sensing others’ developmental needs and helping them develop their abilities. It includes acknowledging and rewarding people’s strengths and accomplishments, offering useful feedback, identifying people’s needs for further growth, coaching, and giving assignments that challenge and foster people’s skills.
- **leveraging diversity.** This means cultivating opportunities through different kinds of people. It includes respecting and relating well to people from varied backgrounds and with different personalities, understanding diverse worldviews, being sensitive to group differences, and understanding the forces that shape people’s different views and actions.
- **political awareness.** This means reading a group’s “emotional currents” and power relationships. It includes accurately reading key power relationships and detecting crucial social networks and alliances.²⁶

Interview Results

One interview participant said that it is impossible to choose the top two because none of the descriptors can happen in isolation from each other (i.e., in order to do one, you have to be good at another). The results seemed to reflect this in that all four descriptors received votes as best describing the three parties with “understanding others” and “leveraging diversity” being the two most commonly identified.

In rating for social competence, as with self-awareness, the board received the lowest average rating at 5.2, board chair received 5.5, and executive directors had the highest average rating of 6.1. In all but one case, the executive director rated the board chair higher than the board chair’s self-rating. As with self-awareness, the board typically was rated lower than the executive director and lower than or equal to the board chair.

All interview participants agreed that, like self-awareness, social competence is key to having a successful relationship. Social competence benefits the relationship by:

²⁶ Ibid., p. 27.

- helping people have fun
- allowing the chair to ensure that board members feel active in their roles
- allowing the chair and executive director to treat everyone equally so the board members feel appreciated when comparing their own treatment to that of external parties or staff
- connecting the executive director with the community. If board members are socially competent, they are better able to provide that type of support.
- giving the executive director more skills to use in generating confidence from the board about the executive director's competency
- enabling executive directors to better manage their boards
- ensuring that communications come from a place of understanding others and focus on the greater good. Said one executive director, "You know when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em (referring to playing the right cards, making the right comments at the right time). Quite often, getting between point A and point B is not a direct line. So, you have to be sensitive to where the board is coming from and what they're bringing to the table."

"The higher the level of functioning in emotional intelligence, the greater the competency" of a person in doing a job or holding a volunteer position, says one board chair, reflecting the general theme in the comments of all interview participants. Having a higher degree of emotional intelligence means that the individual can support the other party more effectively, view the relationship as a partnership, and implement practices that lead to a positive climate for relationship. These in turn, as mentioned earlier, lead to organizational effectiveness and therefore a more effective relationship between the executive director and the board of directors.

Other Leadership Qualities

As discussed, interviewees reflected on one particular leadership quality—emotional intelligence—and how it can influence the effectiveness of the relationship between the executive director and board of directors. In the following discussion, interview participants were asked to reflect on how the relationship is influenced by other leadership qualities that the literature suggests are important to all-round effective leadership.

Literature

Some of the qualities drawn from the literature include what are typically referred to as “soft skills” or “personality traits” such as:

- modesty, humility
- sense of humor
- integrity
- compassion and empathy
- determination, unwavering resolve, persistence
- calmness and composure.²⁷

Interview Results

Interviewees identified only three qualities from the above list as being important to leadership and affecting the relationship. First, one participant indicated that *integrity* was critical in order for the organization to have credibility and success in the community and for the executive director to have the confidence of the board

²⁷ Prem Benimadhu, *Leaders on Leadership: Pat Daniel—An Authentic Voice* (Ottawa: Conference Board of Canada, 2003), pp. 4-5.

Prem Benimadhu, *The Conference Board's Leaders' Dialogue on Leadership* (Ottawa: Conference Board of Canada, 2003), p. 3.

Bennis, “The Leadership Advantage.”

John A. Bienneke and Roger H. Sublett, *Leadership Lessons and Competencies: Learnings from the Kellogg National Fellowship Program* (Battle Creek: The Kellogg Foundation, 2002), p. 7.

Gina Hernez-Broome and Richard L. Hughes, “Leadership Development: Past, Present, Future,” *Human Resource Planning*, Volume 27 No. 1 (2004), pp. 26-27.

Hock, “The Art of Chaordic Leadership.”

and staff. One executive director felt that this quality must be demonstrated and proved every day in relationships. “You have to be a person of your word (‘my handshake is a deal’) and, if I tell you I will do something, I want you to have all the confidence in the world that I’m going to do it. I may not have the ability but I am going to try and you can count on me. You don’t have to worry about that.”

The second quality identified as having some impact on relationship was *determination*, also referred to as unwavering resolve or persistence. While one felt that the organization could not survive without this quality in its leadership, another felt that, if the top leaders did not have that quality, at least they must be able to inspire it in others.

And finally, *calmness and composure* received strong support from those who agreed and equally strong support from those that felt this was not an essential quality of leadership when it came to relationships. On the one hand, some participants could equate being a calm, composed executive director with being on a battlefield. “The bullets are flying and you have to lead. When the guy waves his hand and we’re going over the ridge, they will come because the confidence is there but I think that confidence is that we’ve been calm. In our times, I think we have to still the waters whether it be internally, externally, with the board.” One board chair felt that staying composed on key issues was critical and that, even though their executive director occasionally gets excited or passionate about something, it does not damage the relationship because of trust and respect for that person.

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On the other hand, a few executive directors and chairs felt that calmness and composure was *not* a critical quality to relationship. As one chair said, “Some of the best leaders have not, in any way, been calm and composed. I think that they have occasionally been wildly enthusiastic and even have a temper. They’ve been smart and considerate enough not to use that temper as a weapon but it’s been very clear that they’re human beings who allow emotions out.” Another chair echoed this sentiment in her statement, “Neither the executive director nor the board in this organization are necessarily calm and composed and yet they have good leadership.”

Some qualities from the above list were deemed *not* to be important to relationship:

- **modesty and humility.** In only one organization was credit always given to the volunteers rather than the executive director or staff. That organization always has operated with a heavy focus on volunteer achievements. However, in another organization, neither the executive director nor the board is modest; in fact, they believe that they are all “pretty good at sharing credit” and the executive director is good at “tooting her/his own horn.” The chair felt this was helpful to the relationship because the board does not have to “guess what the executive director has been up to.” The board chair also believes that the executive director’s achievements are monumental, and the executive director makes sure that the board knows that while also giving others credit where due. S/he went on to say that the board is “pretty open about who we are, how good we’re doing, and who should take credit.” The executive director in that same organization felt that, while leaders shouldn’t be constantly talking about themselves, being overly modest does not help the organization grow or build networks in their sector.
- **sense of humor.** Results reflect that most participants think this is not so much of a leadership quality as it is a strategy, skill, or tactic for making people feel comfortable. One chair suggested that “someone who doesn’t make other people laugh and doesn’t necessarily laugh all that much themselves can still be an effective leader.”
- **compassion and empathy.** While many comments throughout the interviews showed that they did have these qualities, interview participants when questioned felt that this quality was *not* critical to the relationship. One executive director suggested that “natural curiosity” is more important, that one can become encumbered by excessive compassion and forget to explore ideas. Instead of philosophizing in an abstract way, parties should discuss concrete practical things, and balance practicality and philosophy.
- **passion.** Although identified as a characteristic of the executive director, board chair, and board in the discussion about emotional intelligence, interview participants did not feel it was a leadership trait important to having an effective relationship.

Generally, interviewees believe that some personal qualities, particularly emotional intelligence, are important to the relationship between the executive director and the board of directors. However, most did not agree entirely with the list derived from the literature search and so they provided leadership qualities or soft skills that they felt were more important to developing an effective relationship. These included: confidence and competence (knowing your business), being open to change, flexibility and adaptability, creativity and innovation balanced with being level-headed and down-to-earth, manner of talking to others, and being honest with emotions. From one chair: “There are degrees of leadership. The higher levels of leadership are about confidence and being and trust *more than* characteristics like humility, etc.” In other words, true leadership and the ability to have effective relationships comes from who a person is and how everyday things are done.

Chapter Six

Conclusions

The presence of an effective relationship between the executive director and board of directors is pivotal to an organization's success. A successful, effective relationship is built on foundations of mutual trust, respect, and appreciation and is influenced by certain practices within the organization, the effectiveness of the organization, and the leadership qualities—particularly emotional intelligence—of both parties.

Practices and Actions

Four practices within an organization (Chapter Three) help create an effective relationship between the executive director and board of directors. These practices influence the relationship by creating trust, respect, and appreciation (Chapter Two) and leading to organizational effectiveness (Chapter Four). The manner in which these practices occur is affected by the leaders' degree of emotional intelligence and personal qualities (Chapter Five). For each of the four practices, the actions that interview participants said have the most impact on the relationship are summarized below.

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Executive Director Support to the Board

While all practices except board self-evaluation were important, the top three—in order—are:

- The executive director gives the board enough meaningful information for it to feel comfortable making decisions.

To be competent in providing support in this area, the executive director must not be defensive if the board asks for more information and must appreciate the responsibility board members feel in making decisions. The executive director must also be able to “sell” an idea with either written or verbal information, anticipate the board’s information needs, and err on the side of giving more information than required rather than not enough.

- The executive director takes the lead in ensuring that board members have adequate orientation to the organization and to their role as board member.

The executive director should provide written material for a one-time “new board member package” and/or the annual orientation session. In addition, the executive director should organize as well as co-present the annual board orientation and provide ongoing education at board meetings as required. Besides these more formal means of orientation, the executive director should meet with new board members individually to answer questions, ascertain interests and skills, and learn something of their lives outside of their volunteer positions with the organization.

- The executive director supports board working processes and structures by sharing information.

Executive directors can help establish a committee structure and ensure that each committee knows what the others are doing. In addition, the executive director can provide draft board meeting agendas for discussion with the chair or executive committee and keep absentee board members informed of discussion at the meetings.

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Board Support to the Executive Director

Interview participants identified two key areas of board support to the executive director:

- Individual board members act as a sounding board for the executive director.

Board members are both volunteer “governors” of the organization and, at the same time, community members with expertise or experience in a particular area. Executive

directors should have access to board members' expertise on an as-needed basis rather than board members giving their expertise without being asked (which can be perceived as micromanaging).

- The board collectively gives the executive director the authority to do the job and, therefore, does not micromanage the executive director's work.

Maintaining the authority of the executive director with respect to operations is reinforced at board meetings by the board chair or a board member stopping board discussion that delves too deeply into operations and reminding everyone that operations are the executive director's purview. In addition, if a board member steps into the executive director's area of authority in between board meetings, the board chair, board executive, or the board collectively deals with this. As the competency of the executive director is recognized and the organization succeeds in operations, the board finds it easier not to interfere with the executive director's authority.

Executive Director/Chair Relationship

Communication and teamwork emerged as central to the executive director/chair relationship. The executive director determines the expectations for communication by observing and adjusting to each new board chair's working style (which board chairs, ideally, appreciate). Board chairs make themselves available for consultation by the executive director, which builds rapport and helps the executive director feel supported. The purpose of such communication is to give details to the board chair and/or discuss how to present something to the board. Contact is maintained through e-mails or telephone calls a couple times a week and face-to-face meetings once a month.

The kind of teamwork specified is a shared sense of working towards the same mission and goals and walking side by side in conducting the work, operations, and governance of the organization. "Shared power" is not a construct that resonates with board chairs and executive directors in their relationship with each other.

Climate for Positive Relationship

Creating a climate conducive to a positive relationship requires that:

- **Disagreement is expressed respectfully.** The board chair's meeting facilitation skills are critical in setting the tone for disagreements or debates that leave people's dignity intact. In particular, the chair redirects off-topic discussions by reminding board members of the organization's mission and should ensure that all parties have the opportunity to express their opinion. The executive director refrains from feeling defensive if someone expresses a different viewpoint and should be thankful that board members are engaged enough to discuss matters fully. All parties retain the belief that disagreements can be positive for the organization in that, if managed respectfully, they will reveal more potential decisions or solutions to the issue being discussed.
- **Both parties view and treat the relationship as a partnership.** The board/executive director relationship is analogous to a marriage relationship, and it is influenced by the same factors that influence the quality of a marriage relationship: effectiveness of communication, integrity, respect, give-and-take, appreciation, and so on. In essence, both parties must share the view of the relationship as one of mutual trust, respect, and appreciation. In addition, the concept of shared ownership might be promoted and adopted. And finally, both parties are working towards the goals of the organization necessitating both parties to be capable of leading and following at different times.
- **Communication is meaningful.** Meaningful communication is founded on honesty and ensures no surprises surface, including both information about the organization as well as feelings about how the partnership is functioning. When giving information to the board, the executive director clarifies its purpose: for information only, for receiving comment, or for board decision-making. While the executive director shares both good and bad news with the board, bad news is accompanied by an explanation and a plan of action to address it. Regular e-mail updates from the executive director between board meetings are as important

as information given at the board meetings, particularly if the board does not meet monthly.

Influence of Organizational Effectiveness

Chapter Four identified two aspects of organizational effectiveness as having the greatest influence on the relationship between the executive director and board of directors:

- The executive director and board of directors have the same understanding of and agree upon mission, vision, and organizational goals.

Activities follow the strategic plan; potential new programs and services are screened according to their relevance to the mission. Annual orientation sessions, retreats, educational components of board meetings, and business plans all help the organization ensure that all parties have a shared understanding of mission. A board member can be assigned at each meeting to ask “how does this fit with our mission” if it does not emerge during a discussion.

- The executive director and the board of directors agree on the governance model in use and, therefore, have clear role expectations.

When board members join the board, they need an orientation to the difference between board and executive director roles that uses concrete examples. Organizations undertake some activities that involve board members and the executive director and staff. Whenever this happens or a joint board/staff committee is struck (organizing a fundraising event to name a common example), it is important to clarify at the start who will do what. Board meetings also include any necessary discussions about whose responsibility it is to do certain tasks related to operations and governance, but the successful resolution of these discussions depends in large part on the chair’s ability to facilitate.

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Leadership Qualities that Matter

Chapter Five outlined the most important elements of emotional intelligence that affect the relationship by affecting how practices in Chapters Three and Four are implemented.

In terms of self-awareness, both parties must be confident in their own abilities to contribute to the organization's success. In addition, board members must be capable of making values-oriented decisions while executive directors must be passionate about the organization. In terms of social competence (that is, how people handle relationships with others), both the executive director and board of directors should strive to understand others' feelings and perspectives, sense others' development needs and help them achieve those, and relate well to people from various backgrounds.

Having a high level of emotional intelligence as well as certain personal qualities will enable executive directors and boards to be more successful in supporting the other, viewing the relationship as a partnership, and implementing practices that lead to a positive climate for relationship. These in turn lead to organizational effectiveness and, therefore, a more effective relationship between the executive director and board of directors.

Influences Requiring Further Research

The board's comfort level in its relationship with the executive director is influenced directly by the executive director's competence or perceived competence. Yet, executive director and board evaluations typically do not reflect how effective that relationship is and what each party does to make it work. In addition, the board and executive director often have conflicts about the process used to evaluate the executive director. The impact of evaluation on the relationship requires further study.

Chapter Seven

Starting Discussion in Your Organization

Questions for Discussion

These questions are provided as a starting point for discussion. Organizations should add their own questions or change these to suit their particular circumstances.

1. What is each party's vision for the relationship between the board of directors and the executive director?
2. In our organization, what practices (Chapter Three), aspects of organizational effectiveness (Chapter Four), or emotional intelligence traits (Chapter Five) influence the relationship the most?

Practices and Actions

Executive Director Support to the Board

3. How do the executive director and board define "meaningful information" for the board in our organization?
4. How much information or what type of information gives our board a comfort level in making its decisions? For example, a board with a number of newer members may feel a need to have more information than if most board members are in the middle of longer terms.
5. When organizing and conducting an annual orientation, what tasks does the board expect the executive director to do and vice versa?

6. In conjunction with annual orientation, what tasks do the board and executive director respectively want to do or believe they should do themselves?
7. What are the reasons for the responses to questions five and six? For example, why does the board want the executive director to present the information on the organization's financial history?
8. What items do the executive director and board want to be included in the new board member package?
9. What topics could be included on the board meeting agenda for ongoing education and who should present them? For example, an external expert on board governance, a staff member on a specific program offered by the organization, a board member on board liability, the executive director on insurance issues facing the nonprofit sector.
10. What does our organization hope to gain by the executive director meeting with each new board member individually?
11. What are the board's expectations for committees to report back at board meetings? For example, committees may be expected to report on any external contacts made on behalf of the organization to avoid duplicating contacts from another committee or with the executive director.
12. What is the process for creating a board meeting agenda? Are both parties comfortable with this process?
13. How are absentee board members kept up-to-date on discussions at the board meeting?

Board Support to Executive Director

14. How are board members oriented to their dual role?
15. How are all board members and the executive director informed about the expertise and experience that each board member and the executive director are willing to share? For example, sometimes a board member who is a professional fundraiser joins a board but does not wish to be used in that capacity because of either a conflict of interest or because s/he wants to learn skills in an area different from his/her paid work.

16. To what degree do board members feel that they are accessed for their area of expertise either by the executive director or other board members? How successful are the board of directors and executive director in accessing the available expertise on the board of directors.
17. Does either party ever feel that the board is getting too involved in operations (micromanaging)? Does either party ever feel the executive director is getting too involved (or is not involved enough) in board functions?
18. What typically happens if discussion at board meetings delves into the area of operations?
19. How is it handled when a board member, either intentionally or inadvertently, gets involved in operations (micromanages) between board meetings?
20. How often and by what method does the board check-in with the executive director to determine if other types of support are required?

Executive Director/Chair Relationship

21. Do the executive director and board chair meet face-to-face at the beginning of the chair's term to determine both parties' communication expectations and working styles?
22. How often does the board chair expect to hear from the executive director by phone or e-mail?
23. How often does the executive director feel a need to communicate with the board chair?
What is the preferred method of communication—phone, e-mail, or in person?
24. What do the terms teamwork, partnership, power mean to each party?
25. How does each party view its relationship with the other?
26. How does each party want others (i.e., the board of directors) to view the relationship?

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A Climate for Positive Relationship

27. Does our organization expect the board chair to have chairing and meeting facilitation skills?

28. If not, how can we establish standard criteria for board members interested in filling that volunteer role? How can we communicate these criteria to the board?
29. Where can our organization access training to help our current board chair or potential board chairs learn or hone the necessary skills to facilitate board meetings?
30. In board members' opinion, what is a "defensive" response from the executive director?
What kind of questions or comments or discussion from board members tend to elicit a defensive response from the organization's executive director? Is it the content or the tone in which the question is asked or comment made that elicits a defensive response? Is the executive director's response defensiveness or disagreement?
31. How can we facilitate a board meeting discussion in which board members and the executive director identify their feelings about disagreements and the differences between disagreement, defensiveness, and conflict?
32. How do the parties know that there is mutual trust, respect, and appreciation in their organization? What signs tell them that?
33. How often do both parties openly discuss the concept of shared ownership and responsibility?
34. When does each party follow the other? When does each party lead the other?
35. How do both parties share information about the organization as well as feelings about how the partnership is functioning?
- 78 36. Does the executive director share both good and bad news so the board has no surprises?
37. How often does the executive director provide regular updates between board meetings?

Organizational Effectiveness

Shared Understanding of Mission, Vision, and Goals

38. To what degree do current activities and the screening of potential new ones focus on the organization's mission?

39. How often and in what forum (i.e., annual orientation, board meeting, or business planning sessions) do the parties discuss mission?
40. How does the board of directors ensure that discussions at meetings stay relevant to the organization's mission?
41. How does the shared understanding, or lack of it, influence the relationship in our organization?

Shared Governance Model and Clear Roles

42. How often do the board of directors and executive directors discuss the differences in their roles? What are "real life" examples from our own organization?
43. When disputes or questions arise at a board meeting about whose role covers a certain task, how is this question resolved?

Leadership Qualities

44. Do both parties have a high degree of self-awareness including how their personality, actions, and style of leadership influence others?
45. Do both parties interact positively, with each being sensitive to what others say and feel?
46. What personal qualities do each party have that can influence the relationship positively?

Appendices

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Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA)
www.arnova.org

Board Source (formerly National Centre for Nonprofit Boards)
www.boardsource.org

Canadian Policy Research Network
www.cprn.org

Centre for Creative Leadership
www.ccl.org

Charity Village
www.charityvillage.com

CompassPoint Nonprofit Services
www.compasspoint.org

Cultural Human Resources Council
www.culturalhrc.ca

Leader to Leader Institute (formerly The Peter F. Drucker Foundation)
www.pfdf.org

National Council of Nonprofit Associations
www.ncna.org

NeighborWorks: Network of Community Development
Organizations
www.nw.org

Nonprofit Academic Centres Council
www.naccouncil.org

The Aspen Institute—Nonprofit Sector Research Fund
www.nonprofitresearch.org

The Society for Nonprofit Organizations
www.snpo.org

W.K. Kellogg Foundation
www.wkff.org

Academic Centres

University of Harvard: J.F. Kennedy School of Government—
Hauser Centre for Nonprofit Organizations
www.ksg.harvard.edu/hauser/

University of San Francisco—Institute for Nonprofit Organizational
Management
www.inom.org

Case Western Reserve University—Mandel Center for Nonprofit
Organizations
www.cwru.edu/mandelcenter/

Yale University—Program on Nonprofit Organizations
<http://ponpo.som.yale.edu/>

Boston College—Centre on Wealth and Philanthropy (formerly
Social Welfare Research Institute)
www.bc.edu/research/swri/

Tufts University—College of Citizenship and Public Service [http://
uccps.tufts.edu/](http://uccps.tufts.edu/)

Columbia University: Business School—Institute for Nonprofit
Management
www.gsb.columbia.edu/execed/inm/index.cfm

John Hopkins University—International Society for Third Sector
Research
www.jhu.edu/~istr/

Journals and Publishers

Journal of the Alliance for Nonprofit Management
www.nonprofitquarterly.org

Publisher—Jossey-Bass
www.josseybass.com

Other

Conference Board of Canada
www.conferenceboard.ca

Government of Canada—Voluntary Sector Initiative
www.vsi-isbc.ca



The Muttart Fellowships



Kelly Sloan

2005 Muttart Fellow

Kelly began her career as a teacher and, over a three-year period, taught each grade from six to 12. After leaving teaching in 1990, Kelly joined the YWCA Saskatoon as director of aquatics—a position that grew to include older adults and youth wellness programs. She completed a master's degree during that time, and a family move to Alberta eventually led to her current position as executive director of the YWCA Edmonton.

One of Kelly's most personally satisfying achievements has been helping create a family-friendly workplace at the YWCA Edmonton. She also has been fortunate to have seen many parts of Canada as a result of travelling to YWCA meetings and counts as one of her "life-changing experiences" attending the 1999 YWCA World Council Meeting in Cairo, Egypt, attended by more than 600 women from 100 countries. She was awarded the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal (2004) and the Alberta Centennial Medal (2005) for contributions to the community and advocacy for women.

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In addition to volunteering in her daughter's school, Kelly also leads/coordinates backpacking, backcountry skiing, and mountaineering trips for an Edmonton mountain club. She especially enjoys getting to the mountains with her husband and daughter along with other families.

Kelly was born and raised on a farm in southwest Saskatchewan that she still refers to as home and visits often. She had a typical Prairie childhood, growing up riding horses, herding cows, hauling grain to the town elevator, and riding the school bus to school. The Prairies' rural way of life, the sense of community, and the roots in the land are values Kelly still holds dear to her heart and that have shaped her personality. Kelly currently resides in Leduc with her husband and daughter.



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