

## Maximising your Board Value: How the EO can get the most out of the Board

An organisation's executive officer plays an important part in maximising the board's contribution to the performance of the group, according to DAVID FISHEL.

**“Both the board and the executive [EO] will be helped in their relationship with one another if each of them understands the need for the other to be capable and powerful.”** – Cyril House, Governing Boards

Board responsibilities are broadly divided between conformance and performance.

Conformance includes those areas which are concerned with legal compliance, financial control and risk management. Performance includes the areas of visioning, target-setting, strategising and achieving results.

In both of these aspects of its work the board is highly dependent upon the level of information and support it enjoys from the Executive Officer (EO). In fact, for a board to be truly effective there are probably just two essential ingredients – a chair who capably fulfils a board-leadership role, and an EO who wants the board to perform, and sees the board as complementary to the EO's work.

Most other blockages to board effectiveness can be removed if these two ingredients are in place.

Existing guidance on governance is focused on the actions, roles and responsibilities of board members themselves.

This brief article, however, addresses the EO, and identifies a number of ways in

which the EO can help the board to optimise its contribution and its value-add to the non-profit organisation.

The recommended actions of EOs are grouped into four areas:

1. Recruitment and induction of board members,
2. Preparation and running of meetings;
3. Personal motivation of board members;
4. Linkage with the chair.

The term “board” is used here – but in your organisation you may call the governing group a Management Committee or perhaps an Executive Committee.

### RECRUITMENT AND INDUCTION

1. It's the board's (or the membership's or the minister's) prerogative to appoint board members – but the EO can be constantly looking for potential future recruits who bring professional skills, networks, personal experience or new energy.

They can be drafted into Task Forces or Sub-Committees, or harnessed through ►

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pro bono advisory or consulting work for the organisation to explore how good a fit they are with the group.

2. An effective induction process and pack is vital. The process will include, at the very least:

Personal briefings with EO, chair and perhaps other board members, and a visit to the premises.

The pack will include:

- Constitution;
- Annual report;
- Current budget and program;
- Recent board minutes;
- Policy documents;
- Up-to-date strategic plan, and;
- Other material.

3. Ensure there are board duty statements, a code of conduct, and a board/governance charter – a sort of operations manual for the board which has become increasingly common in recent years.

These would naturally form part of the induction pack. Strictly, it's the board's job to require and create these framing documents – but if they're not there it is in the EO's and organisation's interests to encourage and assist their production.

4. Responsiveness to inquiries. Especially in a board member's early days, there will be a need for explanations of working processes, of environmental issues, and of the acronyms and contextual knowledge many of us take for granted.

The non-profit field generally, and your organisation's industry sector specifically,

may be a new and mystifying world.

### MEETINGS

5. Plan the agenda and timing of items with the chair and identify priority items and decisions needed. Ensure the agenda includes strategic issues as well as operational reporting.

6. Produce timely, informative board papers. In addition, periodically discuss the desired format and length with the board, and discuss what is considered "board business" and what is considered "EO-business."

7. Include a full EO report in advance with the papers. The board can't afford to be listening to a 20 or 30 minute verbal report at the meeting, so report on the outcomes and results, not just "busy-ness" and the work that's been done.

8. Provide relevant industry background material that improves board knowledge and awareness.

9. Produce discussion documents to stimulate and guide debate of strategic issues.

10. Keep the board informed of any risk-sensitive areas. Board members don't want unpleasant surprises as they tarnish trust.

11. Help the Chair to run a purposeful meeting.

### PERSONAL MOTIVATION

12. Encouragement is important: even though the board employs the EO, in most non-profit organisations the charisma and professional knowledge of the EO carry a lot of weight. ►

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The EO is in a powerful position to encourage board members individually and collectively. Where this is through direct engagement in taskforces, fundraising, or other practical roles, the board member's engagement can significantly increase their understanding of the organisation.

**13.** Where appropriate, suggest targets for the board; specific ways in which the board can assist in furthering the interests and operations of the organisation.

**14.** Be aware of what motivates individual board members.

**15.** Say thank you.

### CHAIR-EO LINKAGE

**16.** Discuss EO leadership and chair leadership. Be clear who the media spokesperson is, for example, and what the parameters are for each role.

**17.** Confirm board-staff communication protocols.

**18.** Discuss priorities and ways in which the board can optimise organisational performance.

**19.** Agree on the key things which need to be achieved in the next year.

**20.** Clarify what information the Chair and the board want.

**21.** Clarify what support and feedback the EO wants.

**22.** Welcome appraisal and feedback.

There are, undoubtedly, as many ways

of striking up a productive relationship between board and EO as there are boards and EOs, but the main principles relate to building trust. A trusting relationship between board and EO is likely to be characterised by:

- Empathy;
- Cooperation;
- Confidence in the respective role each plays;
- The absence of turf wars;
- The right balance between conformance and performance, and;
- Optimising their combined power.

Each of these elements contributes to the others. Empathy, being able to appreciate the perspective of the other party, is a platform on which cooperation can be built.

Role clarity inherently mitigates against turf wars, as confusion over who is supposed to be doing what is a primary source of such friction.

Striking the right balance between focusing on conformance (monitoring and control) and performance (achieving results) ensures that the EO has no reason to feel the board is micro-managing, but equally that the EO is aware that he or she is being held accountable for delivering agreed results.

It is possible for an organisation to survive for some time in the absence of a strong board, but so much more can be achieved if the organisation benefits from this resource. The EO plays a crucial role in the board's development. ■



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