

Professional development

How the CEO can get the most out of an arts board

By David Fishel



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“Both the board and the executive 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 Houle, 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 CEO. 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 a CEO who wants the board to perform, and sees the board as complementary to the CEO’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 CEO, and identifies a number of ways in which the CEO can help the board to optimise its contribution, its value-add, to the arts organisation.

The recommended actions of CEOs are grouped into four areas: recruitment and induction of board members, preparation and running of meetings; personal motivation of board members; linkage with the Chair. To keep to a tight word-limit the CEO actions are presented in a simplified dot-point form.

Recruitment and induction

1. it’s the board’s (or membership’s or Minister’s) prerogative to appoint board members – but the CEO 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 pro bono advisory or consulting work for the organisation to explore the fit.
2. an effective induction process and pack: the process will include at least personal briefings with CEO, 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, code of conduct, and a board/governance charter (a sort of operations manual for the board – 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 CEO’s and organisation’s interests to encourage and assist their production.
4. responsiveness to enquiries: 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 arts may be a new and mystifying world.

Meetings

5. plan the agenda and timing of items with the Chair, identify priority items and decisions needed; ensure the agenda includes strategic issues as well as operational reporting
6. produce timely, informative board papers – periodically discuss the desired format and length with the board, and discuss what is considered 'board business' and what is considered CEO-business
7. include a full CEO 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; report on outcomes and results, not just busy-ness and work 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, and these tarnish trust
11. help the Chair to run a purposeful meeting

Personal motivation

12. encouragement: even though the board employs the CEO, in most arts organisations the charisma and professional knowledge of the CEO carry a lot of weight. The CEO is in a powerful position to encourage board members individually and collectively. Where this is through direct engagement in task forces, fund-raising 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-CEO linkage

16. discuss CEO leadership and Chair leadership – be clear who is the media spokesperson, what are the parameters of each role
17. confirm board-staff communication protocols
18. discuss priorities and ways in which the board can optimise organisational performance
19. agree 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 CEO wants
22. welcome appraisal and feedback

There are, undoubtedly, as many ways of striking up a productive relationship between board and CEO as there are boards and CEOs, but the main principles relate to building trust. A trusting relationship between board and CEO is likely to be characterised by:

- empathy
- co-operation
- confidence in the respective role each plays
- the absence of turf wars
- the right balance between conformance and performance
- 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 works 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 CEO has no reason to feel the board is micro-managing, but equally that the CEO 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 CEO plays a crucial role in the board's development.

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David Fishel currently delivers board development workshops with AbaF. Please visit www.abaf.org.au/skillsdevelopment/ for information about AbaF's board development workshops or call AbaF on 03 9616 0300.