

Who's Next?

Replacing your board chair doesn't have to be a struggle

Identifying the board chair-elect (or board president) is a well-established process for many nonprofits. The board chair-elect is usually chosen at the same time as the board chair. While the chair is leading the board's work, the chair-elect is learning "on the job" about how to ensure that the work is appropriately carried out.

However, too often, many nonprofits struggle with identifying someone to step forward to accept the position of board chair (or president). This is true for both large and small organizations. Here are 10 reasons why appointing a new board chair is difficult:

1. Perception that the job requires too much time and too much work;
2. Feelings of lack of "preparedness" or board training by the candidates;
3. Too much board politics or bureaucracy with which to deal;
4. Very few rewards or recognitions for the effort;
5. Board structure and committees are not properly set up and board roles are poorly defined leaving the impression that the president has to do all the work;
6. "I like the organization, but not that much to want the job";
7. The current board chair has not planned ahead and "groomed" a successor;
8. The current board chair cannot relinquish control of the reins;
9. No one on the board ever discussed the issue during the term of the current board chair; and,
10. When recruiting candidates for the board, their leadership potential was never considered or discussed.

All of these can be fixed, ahead of time, of course. Here are 10 specific actions that can be undertaken to eliminate the

difficulty of finding someone to replace your current board chair:

1. Immediately begin to assess the leadership talent of current board members. Unless it is absolutely necessary, it is preferred to identify your new board chair from current members. It takes time to get to know your organization and the various issues it is confronting and this is better served by a current member.
2. Ask your current board chair to begin to identify potential candidates from the current board and begin a series of discussions with the candidates regarding interest in assuming the board chair role and the type of support/training needed. It is the responsibility of the board chair to develop a successor. The board chair should begin to "nurture and develop" the successor the day the person becomes elected board chair.
3. Institute ongoing board training for all current members in all aspects of governance: by-laws, committee structure and committees, strategic planning, fundraising, etc. There should be annual retreats supplemented by other forms of educational programs for board members throughout the year. The more training that is offered, the more likely it is that they will feel "prepared" to take the leap.
4. Consider offering to the chair-elect a professional board coach/mentor to support the transition during the first year in office. Having a trusted professional available to "lend an ear" to the issues facing the new chair and offering practical solutions builds confidence. Just knowing that there is someone to whom the person can turn to makes the job "less lonely" at the top.
5. Establish a Governance Committee which encompasses the traditional role of the nominating committee. Also consider

a board development committee, but expands the role of this committee into a broader discussion of board educational/retreat requirements, orientation, structure, board performance assessment and board leadership succession. Make sure that the issue of board leadership succession is continuously discussed throughout the year.

6. Ensure that the work of the board is done efficiently, including establishing the

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agenda, running meetings, communicating with other board members, and receiving information from the committee reports. When the work of the board runs "smoothly," it is easier to recruit someone to assume the top spot than when the work is perceived as tortuous and uninspiring.

7. Find ways to reward and recognize your board members for the job they do. Everyone likes to be recognized for their efforts, whether volunteer or paid staff. Invite board members to socialize outside of the work place or to your home during the holidays. Building relationships helps

to motivate people to want to get further involved and provide the necessary leadership to further your mission. Remember, the old saying, "all work and no play" doesn't help recruit a board chair.

8. Provide opportunities for all board members to participate in a wide array of committees, task forces and advisory boards to allow them to grow and develop as a board member. The more experience and knowledge board members have of the organization, the more comfortable they will feel when accepting the board leadership role.

9. Build a culture of success. Organizations that strive for excellence in all they do create a winning culture. Individuals are more likely to want to join a board and eventually lead an organization that is perceived by everyone as a "winner" and "the place to be."

10. Recognize former board chairs either through a formal recognition at an annual benefit event or through the creation of a "Chairperson's Club." Make the role of board chair something special that is looked upon very favorably to make it more attractive for someone to seek and accept the important role.

By recognizing some of the reasons that appointing a board chair is difficult and then by working hard to implement some of the many actions that will eliminate this difficulty, nonprofit, will be able to successfully transition the board leadership in a more effective manner that will benefit everyone that is served by the mission of the organization. *NPT*

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