

The Partnership of the Board Chair and the Chief Executive

By Michael Chulada

Volunteers have always played critical roles in the creation, development and maintenance of effective non-profit agencies. Volunteer boards are a critical part of any organization and provide unique value. Board Chairs have been most successful when they have had strong leadership and worked in partnership with their chief executives. The following concepts will strengthen that partnership.

- 1) The Board Chair is the leader of the board, the CVO, i.e., chief volunteer officer. The chief executive is the leader of the staff, the chief executive officer.
- 2) The Board Chair and chief executive are partners and *serve* as the overall leadership team for the agency.
- 3) As the leader of the board it is the Board Chair's responsibility to assure that the board is structured and operates in ways that enhance its efficiency and effectiveness. An important part of this responsibility is assuring that the board has goals and that progress towards those goals is evaluated.
- 4) Boards require valuable time from their board and staff leaders. That time should be justified by the return that the investment in the board provides to the agency and its mission.
- 5) The entire board supervises the chief executive. Where there is a need for a single supervisor, the Board Chair should fill that role. As such, s/he should provide the chief executive with the things normally provided to a direct report such as support, feedback, performance appraisals, and consideration about issues related to salary, benefits and working conditions.
- 6) A well functioning board is a tremendous asset to an agency. In order to have one, it takes leadership and commitment from the chief executive and the Board Chair. It is worth the commitment. No chief executive spends too much time working with the Board Chair and others to help develop the agency board.
- 7) Boards can make invaluable contributions to the work of the organization if they are composed of the right people with the right focus. A major responsibility of the Board Chair and chief executive is to assure that the Board contains the diversity of backgrounds and perspectives necessary for it to reach its goals and serve the agency's diverse communities effectively. How staff members view and work with the board will be greatly influenced by the behavior of the chief vis-a-vis the board and the messages s/he communicates about the board to the staff. Similarly, how board members view the staff and its work is greatly influenced by the Board Chair.

- 8) One of the chief executive's important responsibilities is to support the Board Chair in his/her work with the board.
- 9) The board as a whole should focus on larger, longer term, broader policy and strategic issues. In addition, individual board members must be effective fund raisers and advocates for the agency.
- 10) The partners need to understand each other's responsibilities and support each other as they carry them out.
- 11) The partners have a shared responsibility to assure that channels exist to enhance appropriate Board/staff communication and prevent or limit inappropriate communication.
- 12) The overall coordination of processes involving the board and staff should be handled by the partners.
- 13) Improving board effectiveness and efficiency should be a goal which the partners consistently work toward.
- 14) The partners should meet regularly to focus on their joint responsibilities, to enhance communication, and to support each other in carrying out their individual roles.
- 15) Form follows function. First, determine what the agency needs to accomplish. Second, based on that, determine what the Board needs to accomplish. Third, based on that, decide how the Board will be structured to accomplish it.
- 16) It's quite likely that your board is structured and functioning in ways that detract from its effectiveness. It may be doing things that are no longer, or never were, helpful.
- 17) The clarity, vision, focus, and relationships of others in the organization are reflections of the clarity, vision, focus and relationship of the partners.
- 18) Different people have different approaches to their work and their relationships. It is important to know what your tendencies/approaches are and what those of your partner are. Knowing this will enhance your effectiveness and the effectiveness of your partner and the partnership.
- 19) Agencies often spend more time trying to correct problems caused by uncommitted or incompetent board members than they spend on enhancing the contributions of committed, competent members. This may correct problems, but it also results in missed opportunities. It should be avoided at all costs.