

Board Chair and Chief Executive Communications | FAQs

What makes exceptional organizations exceptional? One of the key ingredients is a constructive partnership between the board chair and the chief executive. But, just like any relationship, building and maintaining the board chair–chief executive partnership calls for hard work by both parties — and communication is key. Communication is how we exchange information and ideas — two things every board chair and every chief executive need to do their jobs. Knowing when, where, how, and how much to communicate can make a big difference in enabling a strong board chair–chief executive partnership. This resource featuring frequently asked questions is designed to help.

Q: How often should the board chair and chief executive communicate?

A: Frequent communication is important. A regular weekly meeting ensures both leaders stay informed and up to date on any ongoing issues or projects. Identifying and scheduling a set time for the weekly meeting enables both the chair and the CEO to prepare in advance for the meetings and removes much of the administrative burden of trying to find free time on each individual's calendar.

Q: Where should the board chair and CEO meet?

A: If possible, at least one meeting each month should be in-person — over breakfast, lunch, coffee, or inside the office. When that is not possible, the board chair and CEO should consider video conferencing. Meetings taking place between in-person or video meetings can occur via phone. No matter the exact location, meetings should take place in a quiet space where both the board chair and chief executive are comfortable and confidentiality can be maintained.

Q: Should there be an agenda for the meetings? What should be discussed?

A: Even for one-on-one meetings, an agenda can help both individuals prepare in advance and cover all pertinent topics. The chief executive should take the lead in creating the agenda, but should include input from the board chair. As with board meeting materials, the agenda should be sent in advance of the meeting to ensure that both sides have adequate time to prepare.

Meetings can cover any issues that either the board chair or chief executive would like to discuss — updates, ideas, concerns, or suggestions. The chief executive should not be afraid to discuss potential issues facing the organization. Some CEOs find it useful to share “the things that keep them awake at night.” This type of information can help the board chair understand where the chief executive's “head is at” and offer feedback, resources, and support. The board chair should not hold back any concerns relayed from the board. Discussing potential challenges early on allows the problem to be dealt with immediately and minimizes the chances of a small issue turning into a crisis. Additionally, meetings can help clarify any questions in regard to organizational leadership and individual responsibilities.

Q: What if there are no updates for the next meeting?

A: Even if there is not a specific agenda item that needs to be discussed, the board chair and chief executive should still have a weekly meeting. Some meetings may be shorter than others, but keeping lines of communication open to ensure both individuals are on the same page and up to date on organizational activities is important.

Q: Should the board chair and chief executive be communicating outside of scheduled meetings? How?

A: Yes. Emails and phone calls are a great way to share quick updates or ask clarifying questions. If an urgent matter comes up or a crisis occurs, the board chair and chief executive should connect as soon as possible and mutually decide how best to proceed.

Q: Are there occasions in which the board chair and chief executive should meet more frequently than usual?

A: There may be situations, such as the weeks leading up to a board retreat or the first board meeting focused on creating a new strategic plan/framework, in which the board chair and chief executive naturally begin communicating more frequently than what is typical. However, both sides should be wary of over-communication leading to micromanagement. Touching base when necessary is important, but analyzing every organizational decision places an undue burden on both leaders.

Q: Any tips for chief executives and board chairs who have just started working together?

A: Early on in their partnership, it is important for both the chair and chief executive to establish expectations of one another in areas such as communication preferences, frequency of reporting and meetings, and shared and individual priorities. Starting off the relationship by taking time to understand each other's working style and approach to their roles builds the foundation for a mutually beneficial and successful partnership.

It can also be helpful for the board chair and chief executive to create an accountability pact at the beginning of their relationship. The agreement can include issues such as scheduling weekly meetings, providing feedback on the chief executive's performance, or expectations of functions in which the board chair is expected to participate. The accountability pact can be used to guide future meetings.

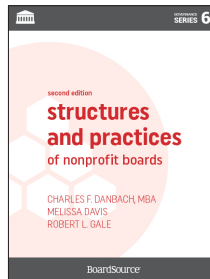
Q: What if the board chair and chief executive do not have a good relationship?

A: Not all individuals naturally click with one another. Some relationships, simply by nature of personal preferences or working styles, take more work than others. That being said, almost any relationship can be improved with commitment from both sides. They should strive to find common ground from which to operate and to strike a balance between the personal and the professional, understanding that flexibility is key. If communication difficulties escalate to the point where only the intervention of an objective third party can help, it could be useful to ask a consultant to mediate and help strengthen the relationship.

HELPFUL RESOURCES



[*Building the Governance Partnership*](#)



[*Structures and Practices of Nonprofit Boards*](#)



[*The Board Chair Handbook*](#)