

# The *Best* and *Worst* of Board Chairs

by Yvonne Harrison and Vic Murray

Respondents perceive highly effective chairs as assets to their organization. Conversely, they view ineffective chairs as problematic for boards and for the organization as a whole.

**M**OST EXPERIENCED OBSERVERS OF nonprofit governance agree that board chairs can have considerable influence on board operations. But not much research focuses on the critical position of board chairmanship and the factors that determine its potential for positive or negative impact.

To better understand how board chairs affect their organizations, we recently completed two phases of a research project (and have plans for a third). In 2006 we undertook the first phase of this pilot study, conducting in-depth interviews with 21 respondents in Seattle, Washington, and in Victoria, British Columbia. Respondents were split nearly evenly between experienced nonprofit board members and CEOs. In 2007 we launched the project's second phase, which consisted of an online survey of 195 nonprofit leaders representing a variety of perspectives (including those of board chairs, board members, CEOs, staff service volunteers, and stakeholders) from across the United States and Canada to verify the results of the study.

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Our research identifies three groups on which board chairs have influence: (1) other board members; (2) CEOs and management teams; and (3) external stakeholders, such as funders, regulators, and clients. Although our exploratory research doesn't touch on this, we have developed a framework that outlines the factors that might shape the behavior of chairs, such as background (i.e., age, gender, education, and previous leadership experience); characteristics of other members in the relationship, such as the CEO; and characteristics of the organization (such as the age, mission, and culture). The organization's larger environment—such as economic and political factors, the organization's climate of competitiveness or cooperativeness, and so on—can also affect board chair behavior.

## Phase-One Findings

Our preliminary research findings suggest that there is considerable commonality among those qualities respondents perceive as hallmarks of effective and ineffective chairs. Respondents perceive highly effective chairs as assets to their organization. Conversely, they view ineffective chairs as problematic for boards and the organization as a whole. The table on pages 26-27 features some of these common characteristics.

## Findings from the Online Survey

In terms of the personal qualities of exceptional board chairs, the findings of the online survey



The Highly Effective Chair*		The Highly Ineffective Chair*	
The Chair's Attitudes and Values (as perceived by board members and CEOs)			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Is committed to organizational mission; is passionate, enthusiastic, and engaged</li><li>Is knowledgeable about the organization's activities and challenges</li><li>Can see the big picture</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Is too focused on details and unable to see the big picture</li><li>Doesn't convey a commitment to the organization</li><li>Uses the board chair position mainly to advance personal career or agenda</li></ul>	
The Chair's Personality Traits (as perceived by board members and CEOs)			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Is charismatic and communicates a broad vision with which others can connect</li><li>Is extroverted but not bombastic; is at ease with people of all types</li><li>Is trustworthy and calm</li><li>Is intelligent and grasps complex situations quickly</li><li>Has a sense of humor</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Is egotistical and dictatorial (ineffective chair personality type one)</li><li>Is introverted and well meaning but unable to inspire others; is uncomfortable in a leadership position (ineffective personality type two)</li></ul>	
The Chair's Conduct (as perceived by board members and CEOs)			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Is proactive; takes initiative in raising issues</li><li>Takes time to interact with others; doesn't rush others</li><li>Listens, doesn't argue or criticize</li><li>Clarifies and helps to redefine issues</li><li>Finds common ground when differences arise; manages conflict well</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Listens poorly</li><li>Doesn't take sufficient action</li><li>Micromanages</li><li>Vacillates and takes different positions depending on whom he interacts with last</li><li>Creates or avoids conflict</li></ul>	
The Chair's Qualities (as perceived by CEOs)			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Mentors and coaches other board members</li><li>Is always available when needed</li><li>Is nonjudgmental and collaborative</li><li>Is always enthusiastic about the organization</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Doesn't respect or trust the CEO</li><li>Tends to be critical and unsupportive</li></ul>	
The Chair's Relationships with Board Members (as perceived by board members)			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Is always well prepared for meetings</li><li>Conducts productive meetings that are on topic, on time, and action oriented</li><li>Is clear about the role of the board and can communicate it to others</li><li>Serves as a facilitator rather than a superior</li><li>Delegates and works as a team player and team builder</li><li>Makes individual board members feel valued and appreciated</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Chairs meetings but fails to lead</li><li>Runs meetings poorly, is disorganized, and allows meetings to drift from the topic</li><li>Contributes to confusion over the board's role</li><li>Isn't proactive; doesn't focus on key issues, and avoids confronting problems</li><li>Is too protective of the CEO and staff; doesn't push the board to assess the performance of the organization or itself</li></ul>	
The Chair's Relationships with Stakeholders (as perceived by all respondents)			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Has strong contacts with key people outside the organization</li><li>Is willing to use contacts to help the organization</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Isn't proactive in reaching out to stakeholders</li><li>Doesn't have, or make use of, external contacts</li><li>Uses the board chair position for personal benefit</li></ul>	
The Chair's Impact on the CEO			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Increases the CEO's feelings of competence and boosts morale</li><li>Contributes to the improved decision making of the CEO</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Increases turnover of valued staff</li><li>Inhibits needed change; contributes to the "slow death" of the organization</li></ul>	

The Highly Effective Chair*		The Highly Ineffective Chair*	
The Chair's Impact on the Board			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensures that meetings are focused, efficient, and produce clear decisions</li><li>• Increases board commitment to the organizational mission</li><li>• Produces clear plans</li><li>• Reduces unwanted board turnover</li><li>• Attracts high-quality members to join the board</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Increases board turnover</li><li>• Fails to resolve major problems, such as a poorly performing CEO or lost funding, until it's too late</li></ul>	
The Chair's Direct Impact on Stakeholders			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Facilitates funding by helping to get grants or contracts</li><li>• Improves relationships with existing or potential partners</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Loses the support of key stakeholders</li></ul>	
The Chair's Indirect Impact on the Organization			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Takes the organization in a new direction</li><li>• Creates a paradigm shift in the organization's thinking and behavior</li><li>• Saves the organization from insolvency by helping it to renew a major grant</li><li>• Helps improve staff morale</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Respondents did not provide examples of the behavior of ineffective chairs resulting in serious damage to the organization. The direct impact cited above can do larger damage, of course, but respondents indicate that problems were fixed before permanent damage was done.</li></ul>	

\*Responses indicated greater diversity when respondents were asked about their experience with ineffective chairs; responses for effective chairs were more uniform.

mirror first-phase findings. Trustworthiness, intelligence, and good listening skills are the highest-rated qualities for board chairs; being dictatorial, critical, and motivated by self-interest are the lowest-rated qualities.

With the benefit of a larger database, we used factor analysis to identify which characteristics of effective and ineffective chairs hang together. Our analysis yielded five clusters of effective board chair leadership characteristics and one cluster of qualities common to ineffective chairs.

#### 1. Relationship competencies:

- Is flexible
- Is comfortable with people of all types
- Is nonjudgmental
- Has strong listening skills
- Has a calm demeanor
- Has a friendly persona
- Is humble

#### 2. Commitment and action competencies:

- Has a strong commitment to the organization
- Has a clear commitment to getting things done
- Uses a proactive approach
- Devotes time to the organization

#### 3. Analytic skill competencies:

- Can see the big picture
- Can clarify and resolve issues
- Can handle contentious issues

#### 4. "Willingness to create" competencies:

- Has high intelligence
- Is an innovative thinker
- Has confidence

#### 5. Ability-to-influence competencies:

- Has connections and influence with key people
- Uses connections to advance the organization

The two lowest-rated characteristics of board chairs were combined to form one indicator of chair ineffectiveness, which we call "dominating behavior":

- Is dictatorial and domineering
- Pursues a self-serving agenda rather than contributing to an organization's well-being

## Discussion

This article highlights the characteristics of





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### Experience Base of Respondents to the Study

Respondents in the first set of 21 interviews had a minimum of five years of experience in their role and had worked with at least three board chairs.

These respondents came from a diverse group of organizations in terms of organizational mission, budget size, staff size, and dependence on volunteers. In our subsequent online survey of 195 nonprofit members in the United States and Canada, a majority of survey respondents reported they had interacted with at least three different board chairs.

highly effective and highly ineffective board chairs as perceived by those who work with them. The behavioral and personality characteristics of highly effective chairs are remarkably similar among the various groups of respondents to the online survey.

Respondents highlight the same qualities and skills of effective chairs as those the literature cites as desirable characteristics of nonprofit leaders in general. Our findings are also consistent with several leadership theories. Ralph Stogdill, for example, suggests that effective leaders are charismatic, cooperative, and sociable and know how to influence others, while Shelley Kirkpatrick and Edwin Locke cite cognitive ability, motivation, and confidence as essential leadership qualities.

The literature also cites the following characteristics of effective leaders, which parallel our findings:

- Being goal directed
- Having emotional maturity, self-, and social awareness (also known as “emotional intelligence”)
- Being creative, flexible, and persistent
- Being committed and independent-minded and understanding the big picture; being compassionate and proactive (also known as “spiritual intelligence”)

Our findings are also consistent with the findings of Richard Leblanc and James Gillies, who conclude from a 2005 study of 39 corporate boards and interviews with 194 board members that there are two types of board chairs. The first, which the authors refer to as “conductors,” are effective managers because they

[R]elate very well to management, have a keen interest in good governance and serve as the hub of all-important board activity. They understand group and individual dynamics and possess remarkable leadership skills, both inside and outside the boardroom. They relate exceptionally well to the CEO (if a nonexecutive chair), committee chairs and other directors. They lead the setting of the agenda, run meetings effectively, moderate discussion appropriately, manage dissent, work towards consensus and, most importantly, set the tone and culture for effective corporate governance.

The second type, known as “caretakers,” are ineffective because they either exert too much influence or not enough.

### So What? The Practical Implications

The aim of our research was to learn more about the characteristics of outstanding board chair leadership. But we can also draw some conclusions about how a nonprofit organization can better select highly effective chairs.

The most important step is to develop a position description for the chair’s role. This should include specific responsibilities of the position vis-à-vis (a) the board, both as individuals and as a group during formal meetings; (b) the CEO and other members of the management team; and (c) external stakeholders. The results of our research can serve as a foundation for the elements these statements should contain.

A position description should also include the qualifications for the job, such as the required level of knowledge about the organization as well as the desired leadership characteristics and interpersonal skills. Again, the results of our research provide some guidelines on the kind of person one should look for.

One of the best ways to develop qualified board members for promotion to the chair position is by establishing a clear system of succession. Future chairs would be appointed to the



position of chair elect or vice chair. The understanding would be that the person holding such a position would move into the chair position within a year or two. Those in such roles can then consciously understudy the chair role.

Finally, it is possible to improve the chances of selecting top-notch chairs if boards are willing to carry out formal evaluations of their own performance. In such a process, members can be asked, "Which board member do you think has the greatest potential as a future chairperson, and why?"

In short, the secret to consistently appointing highly effective board chairs lies in making the process more formal and thoughtful by identifying the kind of person you want and by making a conscious effort to find and develop that person for the role.

### What's Next? Future Research

While phases one and two of our research have yielded important information about the qualities that define effective board chair leadership, we have much to learn about this important position. A key unanswered question is, Which factors are most important in creat-

ing an effective board chair? Is a board chair's personality the most important factor, or is it partly a function of the kind of people s/he has to work with or characteristics of the organization within which the chair and the other key actors work? The third phase of our research will address these questions in greater detail. To this end, we are looking for current board chairs, executive directors, board members, and external stakeholders who can discuss their experience of being, or relating to, board chairs. The problem is that there are very few publicly available lists of such people, which is why we are turning to the readers of *The Nonprofit Quarterly* for help.

If you are the kind of person who finds such research worthwhile and are willing to help us gather future data, you can take a brief two-minute questionnaire that indicates your willingness to assist in the next phase of this research. The link is accessible from the Center for Nonprofit Leadership on Seattle University's Web site at [www.seattleu.edu/artsci/npl](http://www.seattleu.edu/artsci/npl).

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