

# Handout: The Board and Staff Relationship

Source: [Governinggood](#)



Can a volunteer board have much of a relationship with their non-profit's staff? This question comes up in many governance conversations. The standard line is that while the board is responsible for staff, their relationship is really only with the chief executive. I think a more nuanced answer is needed.

My goal here is to suss out the territory of board-staff relations. Much has been written on the importance of the board chair-ED relationship.<sup>1) 2)</sup> But meaningful board-staff relations are not just possible but important, even though the board-ED relationship is the key governance one.

## The Organizational Family

I wrote in a recent post [Kindling Board Trust](#) about the importance of strengthening the relationship amongst board members. Attending to this relationship contributes to better decision-making.

Board -staff relations may not have to be as familiar as those around the board table but they are important in creating a sense of solidarity and organizational community.

Staff often see their boards as remote, distant in their understanding of the organization's work and mysterious in their function. Board members, managerial or professional 'drop ins', usually have little time for the getting close to the front lines.

However, even if board members and staff inhabit different organizational worlds, *mutualism*, to use a biological concept associated with interspecies relationships, needs some cultivation.

## The Board Has One Employee

John Carver, the creator of the Policy Governance Model, says "the board has only one employee", the CEO and that "the CEO has all rest".<sup>3)</sup> Structurally this seems like a good way of thinking about the relationship.

# Handout: The Board and Staff Relationship

Carver's model works when the staff is protected by robust human resource policies and the CEO is held accountable for directing the affairs of the organization to the standards these set.

The board's concern for the welfare of staff is also operationalized by asking questions of their ED/CEO about human resource management<sup>4)</sup> and independent evidence on the employee environment as part of her/his formal evaluation.<sup>5)</sup>

It is essential staff be able to contact the board directly. The circumstances that would give rise to this and process involved is should be articulated in conflict resolution, grievance and harassment policies.<sup>6)</sup>

## Invisible Boards

The nature and value of what goes on around the board table may well be hard to appreciate. But governance ought not be hidden from view as an internal organizational matter. Many non-profit websites make no reference at all to the fact they have a volunteer board, let alone list who is on it.

Non-profits should make an effort to identify their board, and key staff, to external and internal stakeholders. Perhaps they can even put board and staff photos and even brief bios on their website. I realize the case for more online content is a tough one to make in the age of smartphones and social media. And yes, a non-profit's work is paramount, and for many a client focus needs to be front and centre. But it is dedicated people who keep it going.

If one's organization issues a newsletter, what the board is working on at that particular time deserves its own section, even if it is only a couple of sentences.

Perhaps the greater visibility of the board can start on the inside. An easy step here is to include a board member list on the office bulletin board and a staff list, with and titles or program responsibility areas, in the board members' governance kit. And then there is the idea, a controversial one perhaps, of posting the latest board meeting minutes for staff to see.<sup>7)</sup>

## Staff Members on the Board

Few people would recommend staff representatives as members of a non-profit board, with or without the right to vote. This is not unheard of though, especially where there is a collectivist organizational culture. Perhaps it works for some groups. Interest in less hierarchal structures is important territory,

But, where there is an ED or CEO having staff on the board effectively transfers the responsibility for human resource management, out of the his/her hands to what is effectively a volunteer committee. Boards have trouble enough keeping out of the weeds.

## Staff Members at Board Meetings

I know some organizations involve staff in making presentations to the board. These are often about a particular program or new initiative. This enables the staff to see the board and the board to get a sense of staff capabilities

# Handout: The Board and Staff Relationship

and expertise. These types of contacts are fleeting and limited. There are better ways to stress that the board and staff are on the same team.

## Staff on Committees

It sometimes makes sense to have staff, other than the ED, on board committees. Fundraising is certainly one area where staff is likely have both expertise and responsibilities that are essential to this organizational work and the board's piece of it.

Otherwise though, one ought to be careful providing staff support for board committees. Who do staff members report to in such assignments? What about board members? Who do they report to? This can be tricky.<sup>8)</sup> As in any working relationship the responsibilities of its members ought to be clear.

## The Supportive Board

I have yet to encounter a board that was not interested in the welfare of the people working for their organization. Indeed, I have heard board members say that they wanted ways to help staff, cognizant as they often are, of the limited wages their organization provides.

So what can a board do to be “supportive”? Here is my list.

### *1. Board members can do their job.*

Most importantly directors need to show up at board meetings prepared to participate in the work of the board. Away from the board table, board work can include organizing fundraising events.

It is true that Board members often not have as much affinity for governance work as they do for program level work. The former though has to be their first priority. Board work means stepping back from the more tangible and impactful daily work of the organization and looking outward to the needs of the wider community and forward to the future.

### *2. Board members should not make more work for staff*

It follows that board members should not ask staff for assistance in doing the board's job, including requests for information. Such requests should go through the CEO. Committees can also contribute to making work for staff, work that is sometimes fails to fall on any board member shoulders.

### *3. Boards can show appreciation*

Boards can demonstrate their appreciation of staff in the same way people typically show it: expressing interest in staff members' work and lives. This includes recognizing birthdays, marriages and other big life events.

I know of at least one board that organizes, bakes for and caters a staff breakfast. It is not a sit down affair but a buffet that enables staff to hang around the kitchen or take a plate to their desk. Indeed, the breakfast is on the

# Handout: The Board and Staff Relationship

annual board calendar and a board member takes on the task of soliciting contributions for food, organizing the set up and clean up.

Boards can do more to encourage and support the cultivation of their organization's social relationship environment. Board-staff BBQs and open houses can contribute much to this objective.

## 4. Boards can advocate

Most non-profits actively advocate for their cause and for their clients. Much of the advocacy work often falls to staff.

Board members can shoulder more responsibility on this front collectively and, within their own networks, individually. Board members can wear their organization's cause on their sleeves by writing letters to elected officials, attending community meetings and or even carrying a placard at a rally in support of better public policy.<sup>9)</sup>

## A Supportive Staff

I do not want to suggest that staff should support their board because as employees they are beholden to it. Support on this side of the board-staff equation involves just two things.

### 1. Staff can know who is on their board

Staff can make a point of knowing whose is on their board. Obviously this is easy to do when the board is given some visibility in their organization's internal and external communications. To some degree it is up to the CEO to give the board some prominence in his/her own staff communications.

### 2. Staff can be welcoming to and appreciative of board members

It probably does not need to be said that non-profit staff should greet board members, if they know they are board members, with interest and enthusiasm. My guess is that most are welcoming of anyone who comes through their non-profit's doors.

## Staff in Governance

It is important to remember that effective non-profits involve staff in the work of governance in at least two ways.

The first and most common one is in strategic planning. The creation of a strategic plan usually involves lots of consultation. Staff insight needs to be tapped early on. This also helps build commitment to plan implementation.<sup>10)</sup>

The second way that staff gets involved is in the recruitment and selection of a new executive director or CEO.<sup>11)</sup>

# Handout: The Board and Staff Relationship

Staff knowledge and experience is important to the Executive Director, and though the ED to the board. But there is space for there to be other aspects of a relationship. It is important that the board and the staff make some effort to get to know and support one another. It's all about creating a community.

## A Note on the Image

*Cute animal photos are everywhere and I admit to being a regular viewer of them on social media. This one has been posted well over a million times. It easily captured my attention when I began looking for an image that could be a metaphor for this topic. It is an image of a goat and a Great Pyrenees, a breed of dog known for its ability to serve as a livestock guardian.*

This post has its origins in a workshop I led in November on this topic at Halifax's 2018 Volunteer Conference. My thanks to the participants.

## References

1. ↑ On the board chair-ED relationship see: [Effective Board Chair-Executive Director Relationships: Not About Roles](#), by Mary Hiland, and [How To Strengthen the Nonprofit Board Chair-CEO Relationship](#) by Joan Garry
2. ↑ BoardSource, a respected U.S. body that works to improve non-profit governance, has a 2017 FAQ resource titled [Board-Staff Interaction, What is Acceptable, What is Not, You Ask, We Answer](#). It offers a very structural response to the issue
3. ↑ John Carver, *Boards that Make a Difference: A New Design for Leadership in Nonprofit and Public Organizations* (Third Edition), Jossey Bass, p 159
4. ↑ The Chartered Professional Accountant Canada have an excellent publication: *20 Questions Directors Of Not-for-Profit Organizations Should Ask About Human Resources*, 2011
5. ↑ Three workplace health indicators boards might monitor are staff turnovers, sick days taken, and annual staff evaluations completed/remaining. Larger organizations, especially unionized non-profits might consider other indicators. In 2018 the Ontario Nonprofit Network published a [Decent Work Checklist For the Nonprofit Sector](#)
6. ↑ See, for instance, my sample [conflict resolution policy](#) and Jan Masaoka's 2011 *Blue Avocado* piece [Should Staff Contact with the Board Be Restricted](#)
7. ↑ My case for board minutes being shared is outlined in my March 2018 post [Daylighting Board Minutes](#)
8. ↑ Boards ought to be clear about whether a committee is a governance committee that is engaged in board work, or an operational committee, accountable to the ED. The term "board committee" itself can be confusing especially when it involves staff. See my governance guide: [Should We Form a Board Committee](#)
9. ↑ On board advocacy see an excellent 2013 piece by Gail Perry titled [How to Be a Personal Advocate for Your Cause](#)
10. ↑ I am surprised at the scarcity of resources on the topic of staff involvement in strategic planning. I could use some help identifying a some. There are some useful ideas in Charity Village's 2016 piece [Planning For Success: Top Ten Strategic Planning Tips](#)
11. ↑ Joan Garry has wisdom to offer in her 2014 piece [The Staff Did Not Want To Hire Me](#)

**WRITTEN BY GRANT MACDONALD**

# *Handout: The Board and Staff Relationship*

Grant MacDonald is a former Associate Professor at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. For more than two decades, Grant has provided workshops, courses and print resources to a variety of small and medium sized non-profit organizations. Helping volunteer boards and executive directors to govern with purpose, passion, intellect and humour continues to engage and challenge him.