building a
HIGH-IMPACT BOARD-CEO PARTNERSHIP

By Doug Eadie

OFT-TOLD TALE OF WOE

The following story is drawn from real-life experience, but the names have been changed to "protect the innocent." Unfortunately, over the years I've heard basically this same tale of woe countless times.

As Eleanor Davenport walked out of the quarterly Downtown Now! board meeting late in the afternoon of December 16, she felt a now-familiar mix of futility and irritation. In theory, this was the Downtown Now! board's second most important meeting this year, when the annual operational plan and budget for the year beginning January 1 were presented and adopted. The most important board session – theoretically, anyway – took place back in March, when the Downtown Now! five-year goals were updated, kicking off the operational planning and budget preparation process. Both of these critical Downtown Now! board sessions had been well orchestrated and had gone smoothly and uneventfully – "too smoothly and uneventfully," she thought.

"In fact," Eleanor reflected, "nothing very important happened at either of these so-called milestone meetings – par for the course; we board members could disappear overnight and things would run just as well." In truth, there hadn't been much for the board to do, except to ask relatively minor questions, and you didn't want to go very far in that direction or you'd be picking good staff work to pieces. Downtown Now!'s president & CEO, Howard Pierce, and his five program heads had, as was their wont, prepared meticulously for both meetings; the five-year goals not only made sense, they were eloquently stated, and the operational plan and budget really did fit together well. "No surprise there," Eleanor thought, "they're superb at what they do, and we're really good at playing our intended role: an admiring audience of well-behaved little girls and boys."

Eleanor could barely recall the excitement she had felt when Howard Pierce had called her about 18 months ago to ask if she would be interested in serving a three-year term on the Downtown Now! board, with a possible second term in the offing. Downtown Now!, a nonprofit corporation with strong backing from local government, area chambers of commerce, higher education, and the business community, was a heavy hitter in the nonprofit community, and its board – with several business and nonprofit CEOs – was widely considered a plum appointment

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LEADERSHIP FOR CHANGING, CHALLENGING TIMES

This article draws on the rapidly changing field of nonprofit governance and on the author's extensive experience in providing the reader with practical, thoroughly tested guidance in building the kind of board-CEO partnership that will provide the leadership that these challenging times demand. Going well beyond the simplistic notion of governing as merely "policy making," author Doug Eadie describes three keys to building close, positive, and productive board-CEO partnerships: (1) a really "board-savvy" CEO who knows the field of governance inside-out; (2) board concentration on doing governing work that makes a real difference in the affairs of the organization; and (3) the use of standing committees to do the board's in-depth governing work.

Very talented, smart as a whip, and ambitious as all get-out, Eleanor had committed a lot of weekends and evenings to mastering progressively more responsible jobs at Midstate Bank Corporation, where she had been Senior Vice President-Strategic Business Development for the last three years. Not long after she had been promoted to a senior vice presidency, Downtown Now!'s board had decided to expand its membership, and by the time Howard had given her a call, she had already decided that the time had come to begin giving back to the community.

The Downtown Now! opportunity struck Eleanor as ideal. She now had years of high-level experience under her belt, and she felt ready to contribute at a strategic level. And Downtown Now! was the ideal venue; it was doing cutting-edge work in a critical field – economic and community development – that Eleanor looked forward to learning more about. Now, though, after 18 months on the Downtown Now! board, she was thoroughly disillusioned and quite worn down. The gap between the tremendous governing potential that she and her board colleagues brought to the board room and the basically passive-reactive role they had been playing was dramatic and insulting.

Eleanor had thought about resigning from the board, but giving up was not in her nature, so she quickly dismissed the idea. But things couldn't continue like they had for her almost two years on the Downtown Now! Board. It had become clear that Howard Pierce, no matter how capable he was at executive management or what an expert he was in economic and community development, would not take the lead in helping the board find a more meaningful role in Downtown Now!. Several board members had approached Howard over the past few months to share their frustration and dissatisfaction, but he responded by getting defensive and asking what he and the staff were doing wrong. "He just doesn't seem to get it," Eleanor thought, "and much as I hate to think about it, we just may need to send Howard on his way and find ourselves a CEO we can work with."

GETTING ON THE HIGH-IMPACT TRACK

Even though I have seen variations on the sad scenario you have just read many times in nonprofits of all shapes and sizes, including economic development organizations, this tale of woe is by no means inevitable. We have learned a tremendous amount in recent years about building the kind of high-impact board-CEO partnership that makes a significant difference in organizational affairs, provides deep satisfaction to board members, and is capable of withstanding considerable stress and strain. If there is the will to develop a truly high-impact board-CEO partnership in your economic development organization, the way now exists, as this article will show.

There are compelling reasons for your organization's board and CEO to embark on the partnership building road. Above all else, these tumultuous times – always changing and challenging – demand the kind of high-impact governing judgments and decisions that depend on a truly solid board-CEO partnership. Without such a partnership, you will be far less able to capitalize on the wealth of knowledge, experience, expertise, and diverse perspectives that board members bring to the boardroom. A strong, enduring, and productive partnership also breeds organizational stability, laying an essential foundation for your organization's future growth. As you have no doubt learned, a contentious board-CEO relationship can quickly erode internal morale and seriously impede progress. And, from the CEO's perspective, a solid board-CEO partnership provides indispensable backing for tough CEO decisions and ambitious CEO initiatives, not to speak of its impact on CEO professional longevity.

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There are three primary keys to building a successful board-CEO partnership:

1. A board-savvy CEO who brings a positive attitude to partnership building and is a real expert in the governing "business,"
2. Proactive board involvement in doing high-impact governing work, with the strong support of the CEO and executive management team, and
3. The use of well-designed board standing committees in accomplishing the detailed governing work of the board.

THE BOARD-SAVVY CEO

Truly board-savvy CEOs share four primary characteristics in my experience:

1. They bring a constructive attitude to their work with the board.
2. They make their board and its governing work a top CEO priority.
3. They play the leading role in developing their board's governing capacity.
4. They take advantage of every opportunity to turn their board members into owners of their governing work, rather than just an audience for executive work.

Non-board-savvy CEOs can expect a rocky ride with their boards, and more than a few are likely to be sent packing early in their tenure. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that dissatisfied boards are the preeminent factor in premature CEO mortality (professionally speaking, of course, although the extreme emotional stress that a failed relationship can cause might also be a health threat). The good news is that any CEO can learn to be a savvier partner with the board, even if he or she lacks practical experience. And even if a CEO is the kind of "control freak" to whom partnering with the board does not come naturally, experience has taught that new behaviors can be learned and practiced, even when they feel counter-intuitive.

BRINGING A CONSTRUCTIVE ATTITUDE

If a CEO brings a defensive attitude to the partnership building game, it is basically lost before it has begun. Board-savvy CEOs really do want their board to be both a strong leader, making truly high-impact governing judgments and decisions, and a real partner. When board-savvy CEOs look at their board, they see a tremendous resource – knowledge, experience, political clout, community connections – and they embrace with real gusto the challenge of helping their board translate its tremendous leadership potential into practice in making governing decisions.

Board-savvy CEOs are not preoccupied with rules and boundaries in the governance realm. Rather than spend time worrying about protecting themselves and their executives from the specter of possible board incursions into the administrative realm, board-savvy CEOs make capitalizing on their board as a precious resource a top priority. This is not to say that they do not pay some attention to a sensible division of leadership labor between their board and themselves and their executives, but their starting point - and preoccupation - is building a cohesive team that marries the resources of the board, CEO, and executive team in providing the strong organizational leadership required to succeed in challenging times.

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MAKING THE BOARD A TOP PRIORITY

Board-savvy CEOs devote considerable "quality" time to board matters, spending at least 20 percent of their time on the average to supporting the board and managing the board-CEO partnership. Early in my consulting career, the CEO of a county economic development commission shared a practical approach that I have seen work for many other CEOs over the years. "I think of myself," she said, "as wearing two preeminent 'hats' in my CEO role. Of course, as the commission's executive director, I'm accountable for all internal operations, and I share the external relations bailiwick with my board chair."

She went on to say, "But I wear another hat; I'm executive director of what I call my 'board program.' I'm responsible for making sure that the board functions at a high level as my governing body. One way I handle the board program is setting aside a couple of hours every weekend to focus on the 'board program' exclusively. I ask myself how the board is performing, I think about board development needs, I identify interpersonal issues between me and the board or particular board members, and I brainstorm new board development targets and strategize how to address relationship issues."

Making the board a top CEO priority also means becoming a real expert in the rapidly changing field of public/nonprofit governance. For example, a truly board-savvy CEO I know recognized the need to master the board "business" by building a library of books on boards and subscribing to periodicals with serious articles on governance (for example, the *Harvard Business Review*). He also asked his assistant to keep her eyes open for educational programs on governance being offered at national conferences and by such organizations as BoardSource.

BUILDING BOARD CAPACITY

The board-savviest CEOs that I have worked with over the years have not been content to sit back and let their board struggle to develop as a governing body. Recognizing that as unpaid volunteers with demanding lives off the board, their board members cannot be expected to take the lead in developing the board's capacity, these board-savvy CEOs take on the job of "chief board developer" in addition to their other executive duties. In this capacity, they work closely with the board in developing its governing role and work and its governing structure, drawing on advances in the field of public/nonprofit governance. Of course, playing this role effectively requires that CEOs really do become experts in the field.

Wearing the chief board developer hat more often than not involves the CEO in leading from behind, rather than attempting to take the lead directly in board development. For example, the CEO of a regional business development alliance took the trouble to educate her new board chair on developments in the field of governance, sharing articles and chatting over breakfast and lunch on a number of occasions, and she was able to convince her chair to embrace board development as one of the top priorities of his two-year term. This led to the chair's appointing – at the CEO's urging – a task force of five board members and the CEO that was charged to assess the board's governing processes and structure and to come up with practical recommendations for strengthening board leadership.

Board-savvy CEOs know that board members who feel like owners of their governing work will be far more satisfied and committed than board members who feel like they are basically an audience for finished staff work, and being owners will make them better partners. They also know that owning something, for example a mission statement they are being asked to adopt, requires playing a proactive and creative role in shaping it, not merely reviewing it. So these board-savvy CEOs aggressively search out opportunities to involve board members in ways that are likely to make them feel like real owners.

The CEO played an active role in supporting the task force, making sure that it carried out its charge in a full and timely fashion. For example, she found a governance consultant with a strong track record in similar efforts to facilitate task force deliberations, made sure that task force members were provided with a thorough orientation on developments in the governance field, and worked very closely with the consultant in crafting recommendations for task force consideration. Leading from behind to the very end of the process, the CEO saw to it that task force members were provided with a PowerPoint slide presentation to employ in making their recommendations to the full board, and even set up a rehearsal session so they could do a trial run before the board meeting.

TURNING BOARD MEMBERS INTO OWNERS

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For example, the executive director of a worker re-training center, which was jointly operated by the local community college and chamber of commerce, helped his board's planning and development committee re-design the agency's annual operational planning/budgeting process to foster stronger board ownership in the planning process. Specifically, the committee and executive director came up with the idea of a "pre-budget" work session involving the full board as a vehicle for substantive input into budget development early in the planning process, three months before the complete budget document would normally be submitted to the board for review.

This highly successful event, which has subsequently been institutionalized as a standard part of the annual operational planning process, included the following key elements:

- Discussion of next year's operational performance targets for each major program, based on a slide presentation by each program head,
- The identification and discussion of significant operational issues that deserve special attention in preparing next year's operational plan and budget (for example, a high drop-out rate in one of the training programs; placement problems in a particular sector; the inability to recruit enough students to reach the break-even point in one of the programs), and
- The discussion of possible significant expenditure increases.

This board-savvy executive director made sure that the pre-budget work session discussion was captured in a carefully prepared summary of main points, which the board's planning and development committee polished and issued as guidance in detailed budget preparation. By the time the completed budget was submitted for review, board members clearly felt like owners of the process, not just passive reviewers.

HIGH-IMPACT GOVERNING WORK

Governing is a special category of volunteering – and the primary mission of a board of directors. Boards typically do more than govern. For example, many boards involve their members in non-governing activities such as raising money, representing their organization in external forums (testifying before legislative committees), planning conference educational programs, and more. There is nothing inherently wrong about board members doing non-governing work, just so long as it does not interfere with their primary mission: to govern your organization.

Involving your board creatively and proactively in doing governing work that makes a real difference in your organization's affairs is one of the most important avenues to board member satisfaction, and consequently to a stronger board-CEO partnership. However, many boards read and talk a lot, without doing much in the way of serious governing – not because board members do not want to do a good job, but because they do not have a firm grasp of the what and how of governing work. You should not underestimate how frustrated and irritated board members can become over time when they are not regularly and systematically involved in doing serious governing work. In interviews over the years, hundreds of board members have told me how dissatisfied they feel about their role and how their commitment has suffered as a result.

So what is the work of governing an economic development organization? At the highest level, governing an organization involves answering three fundamental questions by making judgments and decisions over and over again, in partnership with the CEO and executive team:

1. Where should my organization be headed and what should it become over the long run?
2. What is my organization right now and over the coming year?
3. How well is my organization doing – in terms of both programmatic and financial performance?

Now the judgments and decisions that a board makes when it is doing governing work are about concrete documents and governing "products" that tend to flow along three broad governing streams: (1) strategic and operational planning/budget preparation; (2) performance oversight and monitoring; and (3) external relations. For example, in the planning stream of governing, boards make decisions about such products as an updated vision statement, a set of core values, strategic change initiatives, and that familiar old friend, the annual budget. In the performance oversight and monitoring stream, boards make judgments about financial reports and decisions about operating policies. And in the external relations stream, boards deal with such products as a desired image and stakeholder relations strategies.

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High-impact governing boards have a firm grasp of the documents and products that deserve their regular, in-depth attention, and they work closely with the CEO in mapping out processes that will involve them creatively and proactively in shaping the most important products. As a result of this collaborative process design work, board members are able to make a significant difference, consequently feeling deep satisfaction and becoming better partners with the CEO. The following real-life story (disguised) demonstrates the power of board-CEO collaboration in mapping out a creative board role in governing.

Two years earlier, the working relationship between Ina Crawford, executive director, and the board of the Pleasantville Development Corporation was badly frayed and growing worse by the day. The new board chair, William Bennett, and four other members of the 15-person board, having grown increasingly frustrated and irritated, were up in arms about the board's largely passive role in the Corporation's planning process, which, as one board member observed during a heated discussion after a board meeting, "makes us feel like we're an audience, not really leaders. Our job is appar-

ently to thumb through well-crafted planning documents that are basically finished. We can ask questions, but if we try to make major changes, we're made to feel like we're meddling in Ina's business – kind of like barbarians at the gate. So we raise relatively minor questions that patently don't make a real difference in the scheme of things."

Initially thrown off balance by the vehemence of the criticism and feeling more than a little defensive, Ina at first felt like circling the wagons and fending off this attack on her executive prerogatives. She had always believed that one of the 24-carat golden rules for strong CEOs was to produce finished documents for the board that would stand up to the severest scrutiny. After all, wasn't that the sincerest form of respect for the board? "Finished staff work" was the mantra that she had heard repeated countless times as she climbed the ladder to the CEO's office.

Fortunately, Ina, although combative by nature and a jealous guardian of her CEO prerogatives, resisted her instinctive urge to do battle, deciding instead to try to understand where William and the other critics on the board were coming from and to be open to creative solutions. It did not take her long to see their point. Taking a close look at how the organization was handling strategic planning, which – in theory anyway – was supposed to be the vehicle for board direction setting at the highest level, she realized how wide the gap between theory and practice was. The last time the "five-year plan of advancement" was updated, some five months ago, the Corporation had employed a consultant to work with the executive team in updating long-range goals and mapping out broad strategies to achieve them.

Truth be told, the 55-page document that went to the board was, indeed, largely finished, and the changes that were made over the course of three committee-of-the-whole work sessions were essentially cosmetic. Reflecting on the experience, Ina realized that her board hadn't made much of a difference and, if she had been in their place, she would have been pretty dissatisfied herself, and probably eventually angry as well.

Taking the initiative by meeting with William, Ina proposed that he appoint an ad hoc committee of three board members, with whom she and her associate director for planning and development would work in coming up with a more creative and satisfying board role in planning, especially of the strategic ilk. The resulting gameplan involved two key reforms that subsequently turned the situation completely around:

- *First, the board agreed to create a standing committee – "Planning and Development" – that would be responsible for annually reaching agreement with Ina on the planning calendar - focusing on points of intensive board involvement.*
- *Second, the board decided to participate in an annual 1½-day "strategic work session" to kick-off the planning cycle. Involving the CEO and all members of her executive team, the session focused on revisiting the Corporation's vision for the future, on identifying critical issues facing the Corporation, and on brainstorming possible "change initiatives" to deal with the issues. The new planning and development committee is formally responsible for following-up on the annual session, basically by working closely with Ina and her executive team in selecting the strategic issues demanding attention during the coming year and reviewing – and recommending to the full board – the "change initiatives" that staff developed to deal with the selected issues.*

Opening up the planning process to more creative board involvement went against Ina's gut instinct and what she had been taught coming up the ladder, but it paid handsome dividends. Not only had Ina actively and creatively collaborated with the board in re-designing the planning process, she had also taken the trouble to familiarize herself with contemporary thinking in the field of strategic planning, which, she learned, had moved well beyond old-time comprehensive long-range planning. Ina had also prepared herself for her planning work with her board by seeking out real-life examples of creative, substantive, and satisfying board involvement in planning that might provide her and the board with a model of sorts to follow.

THOSE GOVERNING ENGINES

The topic of board standing committees might not grab your imagination or send shivers of excitement up and down your spine, but you would be well advised not to underestimate the powerful contribution that these "governing engines" can make to high-impact governing – or the harm that poorly designed committees can do. Although there is some debate about whether it makes sense for a board to have standing committees, the question is settled in my mind. I have never seen a truly high-impact board that functioned without well-designed standing committees. However, poorly designed committees can bedevil board members and CEOs, making it extremely difficult to govern at a high-level and turning boards and CEOs into unwitting victims of bad structural design.

Well-designed standing committees can strengthen your board's governing performance and the board-CEO partnership in four major ways:

1. Committees promote technically sound governing decisions, primarily by enabling board members to get into governing matters at a level of detail that the regular board meeting does not allow. For example, in following up on the annual strategic planning retreat, your planning committee can pay close attention to refining the values statement that was brainstormed at

the retreat, putting it in final form for recommendation to the full board.

2. Committees build feelings of ownership and accountability among board members through their detailed involvement in addressing governing issues, taking pressure off the CEO to be the only source of action recommendations to the full board.
3. Committees can serve as a very effective vehicle for refining and strengthening the board's governing processes. For example, a few weeks ago I observed the deliberations of a board performance oversight committee, which resulted in a re-formatted quarterly financial report that was much easier for board members to understand and to use.
4. Committees can also help to build a more cohesive board-staff working relationship by facilitating sustained interaction of a less formal nature not possible at regular board meetings. They can in addition strengthen the board-CEO partnership by enabling the CEO to develop strong working relationships with committee chairs.

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COMMITTEE DESIGN

The primary job of a board standing committee is to prepare for full board meetings, ensuring that informational briefings and action recommendations are ready for full board review and decision-making. If a standing committee is to play this important role in a full and timely fashion:

- It must be organized along governing – not programmatic or administrative – lines, corresponding to the flow of governing decisions and "products"; and
- Its purview must be organization-wide, cutting across all programs, functions, and organizational units, thereby enabling the board to exercise what I call "horizontal discipline" in its governing work.

Two broadly constituted committees that meet these two criteria have proved to be indispensable "governing engines": planning (often called planning and development, or planning and program/business development) and performance monitoring (often called performance oversight or management oversight). Your board's planning committee would be responsible for assisting the board in dealing with a wide variety of planning decisions and "products" – everything from updating your association's values and vision statement to adopting the annual operational plan and budget. Your board's performance monitoring committee would be responsible for assisting the board in assessing on an ongoing basis how well your organization is performing financially, programmatically, and administratively. You can easily see that these two committees satisfy the horizontal discipline criterion: planning covers all planning that your organization does; performance monitoring monitors all activities going on in your organization.

Virtually all boards have an executive committee, consisting of board officers and/or the chairs of the other standing committees. The problem with the traditional executive committee is that it is often treated as a mini-board, which basically screens all information going to the full board, thereby more often than not alienating other board members, who feel less important and out-of-the-loop. Many boards in recent years have turned their executive committee (frequently called the "governance" committee these days) into a committee on board operations, rather than a mini-board, whose primary responsibility is to make sure that the board is functioning smoothly as a governing body.

AVOID THE SILOS

Violating the key design principle that standing committees should correspond to the board's governing work, rather than to the programmatic and administrative work of your economic development organization, is a sure-fire way to reduce your board's governing performance, and consequently to damage the board-CEO partnership. Two types of dysfunctional committees stand out as enemies of high-impact governing: (1) "tip of the administrative iceberg" committees that correspond to narrow administrative functions – for example, finance and personnel; and (2) "program silo" committees that correspond to major programs or services that your organization provides – for example, education and training; the revolving loan program; the downtown beautification program; the business retention program, and the like.

Rather than enabling your board to exercise horizontal discipline in carrying out its governing work, these poorly designed committees narrow your board members' perspectives, chopping their governing work into little pieces that do not add up – not unlike the proverbial blind person who sees an elephant as only an ear, a trunk, a tail, or a foot – but missing the whole elephant. This poorly designed structure will inevitably turn your board into a collection of technical advisory committees, in the process actually inviting board meddling in administrative and programmatic detail.

SOME TRIED AND TRUE GUIDELINES

The following guidelines – thoroughly tested in practice – have helped standing committees function at a high level in supporting and facilitating high-impact governing in economic development organizations and other nonprofits:

1. Every board member should serve on one and only one standing committee – with the exception that when one is serving as a committee chair he or she will also serve on the executive or governance committee. If any board members are allowed to avoid committee service, not only will you create a caste system (those who must participate and those who are too important to have to), but where smaller boards are concerned one or more committees might drop below a "critical mass" of members.
2. Only board members should serve on board standing committees. Although non-board volunteers can make a valuable contribution by serving on non-governing committees and task forces, adding them to board standing committees is a sure way to dilute board accountability and erode board credibility. Nothing prevents a standing committee from making use of non-board volunteers by establishing special sub-committees and task forces that report to the board standing committee. For example, the planning committee of an economic development corporation board created a vision and values task force consisting of non-board volunteers who carried out their planning work under the aegis of the planning committee.
3. The standing committees must be the only path to the full board agenda. This is a massive calcium injection, ensuring that committee work is taken seriously and that committees don't degenerate into mere discussion groups.
4. All reports at full board meetings must be made by committee chairs and other committee members, with the sole exception of the CEO's regular report. This simple requirement not only fosters committee members' ownership of reports and recommendations to the board, but also ensures that committee members do their homework (not wanting, of course, to be embarrassed in public). There is the added benefit of the ego satisfaction that comes from committee members' visible leadership at board meetings.
5. The CEO should assign a senior executive to serve as chief staff to each committee, in this capacity ensuring that the committee is provided with the staff support required to carry out its governing work in the full and timely fashion .

IN CLOSING

There are compelling reasons to devote serious time and attention to building a high-impact board-CEO partnership in your economic development organization. Not only does your organization need the high-impact governing decisions that such a partnership generates, effective CEO leadership depends on the partnership. This article has discussed three critical keys to building such partnerships: (1) a CEO who is really "board-savvy," bringing the right attitude and knowledge to working as an active partner with the board; (2) meaningful board involvement in doing high-impact governing work that makes a serious difference; and (3) use of a board standing committee structure that reflects the actual governing work that the board is doing, rather than corresponding to narrow programmatic or administrative silos.