

10 Great Board Chair Practices ^[1]

In this blog, CompassPoint board expert Marla Cornelius shares 10 practical and practicable tips to elevate the impact of board chairs to better serve their organizations. Guaranteed you'll find at least one, if not a few, helpful pointers for your board.

In the blog "[The Impact of Board Chairs](#)," ^[2] I talk about how board chairs make a significant impact on their executive directors, their boards as a whole, and the organizations they serve. At CompassPoint, I've had the opportunity to learn from many great board chairs who are indeed making an impact. Though none of these leaders are perfect, what is common among them is intentionality. They are thoughtful about how they want to energize the chair role, and they establish regular practices to support, enliven, and challenge their boards toward greater purpose.

Here are 10 board chair practices and specific tips that I find practical, replicable, and inspiring. Special thanks to my colleagues Jeanne Bell, Nelson Layag, and Michelle Gislason, who shared their own terrific ideas which I have included throughout.

1. SET AN INSPIRING TONE

The first moments of a board meeting set the tone for the whole agenda. Think carefully about how to open the meeting. What's the right spirit for this conversation? What energy do I want to bring? What opening will inspire others?

Board chair practices to set an inspiring tone:

- Read one of your favorite poems to open each meeting.
- Ask everyone to share a brief personal story about why they are a board member.
- Continuously reference the organization's purpose and values at each and every meeting. Re-centering the conversation on what matters keeps people inspired and focused.
- Build the agenda with the most energizing and inspiring items first, moving routine items and dry updates to the end.

2. TAKE A LEARNER'S STANCE

It's important for boards to establish a culture of ongoing learning. Learning not only increases board member engagement but ensures that the board is aware of what's working and what needs to change.

Board chair practices that embody a learner's stance:

- Embody a learning mindset. Demonstrating this stance inspires others to do the same. This can be especially helpful for board members who were recruited for their professional status and struggle to step out of the role of expert.
- Model humility and vulnerability. This builds trust and makes it more comfortable for others to ask questions and take risks.

- Accept that there is so much you don't know—about the organization, about the field, about nonprofit governance—and identify specific professional development goals for yourself that will make you a better chair.
- While new members still have "outsider perspective," take advantage of their newness to learn what's working and hear ideas for changes. Create space at board meetings, specifically for new members, to ask questions and share insights.

3. VALUE STAFF AND RESPECT THEIR INPUT

Building trusting, strong relationships across board and staff is important for ongoing partnership and collaboration. It's a common mistake for boards to underestimate how critical staff input is to good governance decision making.

Board chair practices that value staff and respect their input:

- Invite and welcome staff at all board meetings, not just the meetings where they are scheduled to present.
- Do not seat staff away from the board table or in an arrangement that might convey they have less-than-equal status in the board room.
- Explicitly seek staff's input, especially when the organization is making critical decisions like engaging in merger negotiations, hiring a new executive director, or setting new strategy.
- Have annual board and staff social events.
- Host periodic brown-bag lunches at the organization where staff can stop in, chat, and ask informal questions.

4. BRING YOUR WHOLE SELF TO THE ROLE

The board chair is one of the most challenging and impactful leadership positions on the board, yet many board chairs assume the role with little thought or intentionality about why they are taking the position and what they want to make of it.

Board chair practices to bring your whole self to the role:

- Identify your talents and strengths so that you can bring them to bear powerfully and intentionally on behalf of the organization.
- Know your weaknesses and share them transparently with your board and executive director.
- Stay grounded in why you joined the board to begin with. Reflect regularly on your personal purpose and how it aligns with your role as board chair.
- Think about your legacy. Decide what you hope to accomplish in your tenure and set personal goals accordingly.

5. KNOW THAT TIME DOESN'T STOP BETWEEN MEETINGS

The organization and its environment are fast-moving, which means that staff are experiencing continuous change—yet, the board typically operates at a slower pace. This can contribute to lost momentum and stagnation between board meetings.

Board chair practices to ensure continuity between board meetings:

- In the "off months," check in with other officers and committee chairs about how they are doing. Ensure they are clear on their responsibilities and ask if they need support.
- Create an annual board calendar with board meetings, committee meetings, and other organizational events so that everyone has a snapshot of the whole year and is looking beyond the next month.

- Partner with the executive director to create a board packet that serves as a through-line, explicitly connecting conversations from prior board meetings to the next.
- Reach out to board members one-on-one to see if they are engaged. Ask about their strengths and interests and suggest roles and assignments that are a great match for them and help keep momentum going.

6. PARTNER WITH THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

While the chair supports and manages the board, they do not do this alone or without guidance. That guidance often comes in the form of a partnership with the executive director, who shares responsibility for the board's work. This partnership is mutually beneficial as executive directors also rely on their board chairs for support and guidance.

Board chair practices to partner with the executive director:

- Understand the difference between your collective governance responsibilities and your individual volunteer role in management support. Understand and trust that the executive director is running the organization. Stay in your lane and help others do the same.
- Come to agreement with the executive director about how you want to work together and make sure you have a shared vision about the work of the board and each other's distinct roles and responsibilities.
- Set the executive director up for success with clear expectations, onboarding support, and regular feedback.
- Ensure that the full board provides the executive director with an annual review that is meaningful, includes staff input (not just the board's), and is regularly implemented.

7. TALK ABOUT CULTURAL DIFFERENCES, POWER, AND PRIVILEGE

Governance is about ensuring the organization is serving the community—which means that fundamentally, board work must be inclusive and valuing of cultural differences. Race, gender, class, power, and privilege are always at play inside the board room.

Board chair practices to support conversations about cultural difference, power, and privilege:

- Learn as much as you can about the specific community groups your organization serves. Explore how this compares to the demographics of the board and what impact that might have.
- Raise issues of cultural difference, power, and privilege frequently. Bring these issues to the forefront of board discussions so that it becomes the norm.
- Be self-aware about your own power and privilege—whether from your role as board chair or through examining aspects of your personal identity such as race, gender, age, or class. Be mindful of how you can use your positional power responsibly and when you might be inappropriately exercising your privilege.
- Oppression is painful and often difficult to talk about. Get support from others about how to bring the issues up. See the blog "[Does Your Board Foster Inclusivity](#)" ^[3] for more ideas on how to start this conversation.

8. ZERO TOLERANCE FOR BAD BEHAVIOR

Occasionally boards may find themselves faced with a challenging personality whose behavior is disruptive and contributes to harmful power dynamics. Understanding that governance is collective means knowing that a healthy environment that fosters dialogue and respectful group process is imperative.

Board chair practices that support zero tolerance for bad behavior:

- Don't hesitate to act if there is bullying or dominating behavior going on. Immediately consult with the executive director and others to share your concern and seek their perspective. Know that this unpleasant responsibility is ultimately yours and should not be left to the executive director.
- Set a group agreement about how to respectfully disagree with one another. Refer to such agreements at the beginning of each meeting. This provides permission from the whole group to address any concerning behavior in the moment.
- In other cases, a one-on-one conversation is best. Call individual board members to provide honest and direct feedback about how their behavior is impacting others and the group process.

9. BE A FUNDRAISING CHAMPION

Most organizations expect board members to engage in fundraising, but setting and meeting those expectations remains a pain-point for many board members and executive directors alike.

Board chair practices to be a fundraising champion:

- Set an expectation of 100% board giving each year and personally talk to each board member about that expectation.
- Establish an annual pledge ceremony. Once a year, include board giving on the agenda and prepare board members by asking them to bring their checkbooks or credit cards. Have pre-printed pledge forms ready and open the meeting with a personal story about why you give. Add your pledge to the basket and pass it along to the other board members who then also share their personal reasons for giving as they make their own pledges.
- Work with the executive director to create specific opportunities for board members to engage in fundraising. Ensure that the fundraising activity is a good fit for the person. Most importantly, insist on sufficient staff or committee support so that each board member succeeds.
- Have a standing fundraising agenda item at regular board meetings—not just development committee meetings. All of the board members can engage in their specific fundraising activities during the same meeting. For example, time could be spent making thank you calls or writing notes to donors.

10. REPLACE YOURSELF

Many organizations have few processes in place to ensure smooth transitions from chair to chair, which can be particularly challenging for the executive director, who usually bears the brunt of choppy transitions.

Board chair practices to find your replacement:

- Create a board chair job description and periodically discuss it with the whole board so that everyone is clear about what the role entails.
- Provide coaching and mentorship for likely candidates to support their leadership development and build a pipeline of board leaders ready and excited to step into the chair role.
- Ensure a smooth succession to the next chair. Meet with your successor to answer questions, provide continuity, and support their onboarding process and transition into the role.

If you have other examples of what great board chairs do, please share them in the comments below!

Resources

Read other CompassPoint blogs on board governance:

- Blog: [\[4\]“Generative Thinking: The Board’s Highest Purpose”](#) [5]
- Blog: [“Does Your Board Foster Inclusivity?”](#) [3]

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