

Board Chair-Executive Director relationships in nonprofit organizations Summary of findings

Nonprofit leaders are reported to influence the effectiveness of nonprofit organizations, but little is known about the nature and extent of that influence. In addition, there are very few studies related to the key leadership relationship between the board chair (BC) and the executive director (ED). This study explored the interpersonal dynamics of BC/ED relationships and their effect on the nonprofit organizations in which they serve. BCs and EDs from 16 nonprofit organizations in Santa Clara County volunteered to be interviewed individually for the study. (In addition, BCs and EDs from two other nonprofits participated in a pilot study.) Participating organizations ranged in size (measured by annual expenditures) from less than \$500,000 to over \$10 million. The duration of the BC/ED relationships in the study ranged from six months to five years. Field of service also varied. None of these characteristics were found to relate to the study findings.

Open-ended questions were used to elicit descriptions from participants of the dynamics in their relationship and its effect on the organization. The findings are organized here according to those two categories: dynamics and effects. The effects of the relationships on the organizations were considered using the concept of social capital. Social capital is the asset that is available to an organization because of relationships. Higher levels of social capital have been related to improved organizational performance.

Relationship dynamics

Five different types of interpersonal interactions characterized the relationships: (a) sharing facts (e.g., giving data), (b) sharing ideas (e.g., brainstorming), (c) sharing feelings (e.g., supporting, appreciating), (d) sharing knowledge (e.g., teaching), and (e) “give and take” (i.e., adapting to each other’s style). For most pairs, all five types of interactions were evident but to varying degrees. All of the interaction types contributed to building trust. However, the

strength of trust in the relationships varied and was related to the number of different trust-building behaviors. Trust-building behaviors fell into three, cumulative categories: calculus-based trust, knowledge-based trust and identification-based trust. Each of these levels built on the former with identification-based trust being the strongest.

Influence on the organizations

The study identified three patterns reflecting the focus of what the pairs worked on together: managing (focusing on internal operations), planning (managing plus strategic work with the board), or leading (managing, planning, and working with the board to engage the community). Social capital was evident in the pairs' scope of relationships and networks. The level of social capital being created by a pair was found to relate to their working together type (managing, planning, or leading). Organizational effects noted by pairs with high levels of trust and social capital included energy, productivity, confidence, and synergy. There was a positive relationship among the strength of trust in a pair, their working together type, and the effect on the organization. For example, leading pairs had the strongest trust, the greatest evidence of social capital creation and described the most benefits to their organizations as a result of their relationship.

Implications

The BC/ED relationship is a powerful resource to leverage in support of a nonprofit's mission. Building the BC/ED relationship is an important part of nonprofit leaders' work. This importance needs to be reflected in practices of BC selection, terms of office, expectations of executives and board development. It is a myth that what is personal is not professional. The potential to increase nonprofits' stock of social capital and reap its benefits is great and unrealized. The BC/ED relationship is a place to begin.

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