



GIVING & RECEIVING CRITICISM

Five Tips for Chief Executives and Board Chairs Working to Build a Strong Partnership

Successful organizations are characterized by strong chief executive–board chair partnerships — partnerships founded on respect and trust and focused on serving as each other’s sounding board, as each other’s champion... and, yes, critic. Building and maintaining such a partnership takes work and intentionality. There are differences in personality and working styles to overcome — and fairly quickly, due to the fact that board chairs rotate into and out of the position on a regular basis. It is further complicated by the fact that the chief executive reports to the board, which is managed by the board chair.

All that said, strong, effective partnerships do exist, and building in mechanisms for giving and receiving feedback — for serving as each other’s chief critic — from day one is key. Here are some tips on how to do that.

1. KNOW THYSELF.

How you execute your leadership responsibilities and tasks and navigate your partnership depends on who each of you are — your values, preferences, traits, attitudes, biases, interests, expertise, skills, and knowledge. Self-awareness of who you are and how it is applied in your interactions with each other is “use of self” — a concept that acknowledges the uniqueness of each individual.

Early on, think about and share with each other how you tend to use your ‘self’ when leading others and working in partnership with other leaders. Show you’re human and fallible by sharing past struggles, mistakes, missed opportunities, and the lessons learned. Being open and honest with each other goes a long way in building trust and respect.

2. ESTABLISH YOUR EXPECTATIONS OF EACH OTHER.

Review, agree on, and understand your job descriptions.

Clear job descriptions provide a starting point for understanding the responsibilities and tasks at hand. Governance and management complement and support each other — both focus on mission but through different perspectives and actions. Chief executives and board chairs have separate and shared tasks related to management and governance. Your partnership is a means to an end — accomplishing tasks in pursuit of mission. It is the communications headquarters for sharing information, addressing issues, and planning next steps.

Review your current job descriptions together. Do they reflect each person’s view of what the other should be doing? If not, discuss, debate, and revise as necessary, so you can come to a mutual understanding of how each of you contributes to the shared responsibilities.

Review the organization’s strategic plan or framework; discuss your own individual visions for the organization, and your shared and individual priorities.

Are you on the same page? If you have conflicting views, talk through them and come to an agreement.

3. DETERMINE HOW OFTEN AND HOW YOU WANT TO MEET, AND PLAN ACCORDINGLY.

Weekly? Monthly? In person? Via telephone? Arrange your schedule as needed.

4. INVITE CRITICISM IN YOUR MEETINGS.

Dianna Booher, founder of Booher Consultants, a communications training firm, recommends starting professional relationships with a frank discussion asking “Do you think we’ll make any mistakes over the next few years?” Of course you’ll make mistakes. Who doesn’t? This opens the door to a conversation about how each of you want to handle feedback and criticism and to the possibility of institutionalizing the practice of asking for feedback — for criticism — into every one of your one-on-one meetings.

But make sure your feedback is coming from the right place. Do not make it personal. It should come from the desire to advance your mission and the recognition that partnership is about learning from each other and understanding that combined wisdom is stronger than the wisdom of one. You want the highest-quality thinking and action possible for your mission and organization.

By institutionalizing the practice of providing criticism, it will become easier to give and to take feedback.

5. BE OPEN-MINDED...

...to new ideas and practices and to working with each other to improve on existing practices. Find yourself saying

- I hadn’t thought about that. That’s a good idea.
- What would that look like?
- Let me think about that for a few days. Let’s discuss again at our next meeting.
- How can we make that work?

The goal, as stated earlier, is to engage in the highest-quality thinking and action possible for the good of the organization and your mission — together, as partners. Two heads are better than one, after all.