

The CHAIR-CSO System for Success

All nonprofits with senior staff know that if the chair and CSO (chief staff officer – your organization may use CEO or Executive Director) are not working well together, the community will not get the best possible results. Since results for the community are the reason for existence, and the basis of having nonprofit status, how can organizations improve their chance of an excellent working relationship?

I have been in both roles, and have consulted to many nonprofit boards and senior staff over the past fourteen years. Based on my experience, I propose a Chair-CSO Relationship System.

C = Common Cause

H = Help from Board and staff

A = Advance Preparation

I = Integrity and Values

R = Relationship.

C = Communications

S = Shared Leadership

O = Oversight and Feedback

Let's start with the Chair portion.

C = Common Cause

Both individuals must focus on achieving the mission, rather than stroking their egos or implementing pet projects. If you have agreed on a desired future (vision) for your community, and your organization's role in achieving that future, then disagreements are about the details, and can be discussed with respect.

If one or the other is challenging the vision, mission, organizational values or strategic priorities, then they cannot resolve the issue on their own. The Board should do strategic planning, and everyone should commit to the results or leave. The approved Strategic Plan provides direction for use of resources, operational plans, performance objectives and related plans such as fundraising. That direction can considerably reduce potential sources of friction.

The cause is the Chair's personal passion, where the CSO's top personal priority may be elsewhere. However, they must fully agree with the mission and its importance.

H = Help from Board and staff

The CSO is hired by, and reports to, the Board. While the Chair is usually empowered to give day-to-day direction and advice, the Chair is only acting for the Board, and cannot give direction that is not consistent with Board decisions. The Board should have a committee, usually led by the Chair, dealing with executive search, compensation and performance review rather than leaving it to the Chair. This reduces personal bias, helps with Chair transitions, and ensures that Board members have a chance to provide input.

Nonprofits usually work best when the CSO is the only employee of the Board, and the Board does not interfere with the management of other staff. It defines ethical values, approves high level policies and payroll resources, and is involved with succession planning for the CSO position. But it does not accept staff end runs outside of a formal complaint system for serious abuse.

Board members can best support the Chair by understanding their roles (as board member, officer, committee chair, committee member, etc.) and carrying them out conscientiously. They can prepare well for meetings, and restrict their information requests to items that help them make decisions or carry out board work.

Staff can support the CSO best if they understand the strategic plan and how their work supports it. The CSO also needs to relay the Board's information needs, so staff can provide the appropriate reports and recommendations within time frames. Staff can also recognize that right before board meetings and AGMs is not the best time for a long discussion with the CSO on planning a training calendar!

If the Board and staff are carrying out their roles well, there will be fewer issues for the Chair and CSO to sort out. That leaves more time and energy for getting results for the community!

A = Advance Preparation

Turnover is inevitable in both roles. Bylaws often set a three-year maximum for chairs (with annual election) and some burn out faster. The average length of stay for an Executive Director is a little more than three years. Try not to change both at once.

Your goal should be to have each come into an environment supportive of success. Both should thoroughly understand their roles, in a generic sense and in terms of what this organization expects. Good resource material on the generic roles should be made available for reading. If the position specifications are not up to date, or maybe even not written down, drafting them would quickly make overlaps, gaps and uncertainties apparent to they could be resolved before a problem arises.

Orientation should be phased in and include introductions throughout the community. The Chair more often comes from within, having been serving on the board for years, but occasionally a Chair is parachuted in (especially when government appointments are involved). The past chair is usually still around to help the new Chair, but the prior CSO is rarely available beyond a short transition period. The rest of the board and staff must be prepared to help with both learning and workload as the new person settles in. That includes giving lots and lots of feedback, and participating in the setting of clear performance objectives.

Few people will consider accepting a status quo role at a leadership level. They come in to make changes, and both board and staff have to be "change-ready". That is, they have talked about what worked and what did not in the recent past, and what changes are required because of the latest round of strategic planning or environmental changes. They understand that even if the last chair or CSO was considered a goddess, the new person is not a clone and must make the role their own.

Unfortunately, some leaders come into atmospheres poisoned by distrust involving a predecessor. In those cases, find out what will rebuild trust in that organization, and give priority to restoring trust over the first six months or so. An interim leadership arrangement may be best, to allow the poison to dissipate and structures to rebuild before a long-term leader arrives.

I = Integrity and Values

The best way to build or keep trust is to act with integrity and in accordance with both organizational and personal values. The Chair and CSO are the two primary role models in the organization for ethical behaviour, and are scrutinized at all times.

Both should live their lives by a set of principles of right conduct, include being truthful and trustworthy. Yes, I said their lives, not just their roles at the organization - that they are may be seen as Chair or CSO even in social and recreational settings. Integrity is holistic; you are not an ethical person if you are only

ethical in some parts of your life. They should have considerable dialogue about the organization's values, to ensure they agree on the meanings and not just the words.

Many conflicts can be avoided if the Chair and CSO talked through ethical dilemmas based on what is best for the community and organization, as always putting their egos aside. The decision-making includes which options are a best fit with organizational values, as well as which option would let them sleep well at night.

Of course, the organization will be even better served if the Chair and CSO are both committed to excellence in how they carry out their roles. It is a lucky organization where both not only do their best but also strive to keep learning and improving.

R = Relationships

In my humble opinion, a Chair and CSO should have ONE relationship – that of friendly and collegial professionals. No matter how well they come to like each other, they are *not* friends. They can empathize and sympathize and even socialize – but the Chair always represents the Board, the CSO's employer. They should be humane, supportive and understanding in times of crisis and stress, but be fair to the organization too.

Chairs and CSOs who have a family or marital or extra-marital relationship are going to find it extremely difficult to be friendly professionals above all. At times it will be impossible, and the organization will suffer.

Occasionally a Chair and CSO will be so incompatible that they just cannot get along. In that case, both should consider which the organization can more easily afford to lose. The board may have to make the choice.

Now here's the CSO portion:

C = Communications

S = Shared Leadership

O = Oversight and Feedback

C = Communications

The Chair and the CSO must talk often, sometimes with no others present and without agenda timelines. Each should keep lists of the items they want to mention at their next talk, in priority order, to keep the talks within a reasonable length without missing key items. They need to know where to reach each other even when others do not, in case of a crisis, or how to reach someone to whom authority has been delegated.

E-mail allows for easy communication of information items and for setting up revised times to talk. A need for frequent dialogue is not an excuse for rambling three-hour calls at 10 p.m. every other day. Focus on the future much more than on assigning blame.

Both need to be committed to avoiding having each other surprised by media coverage, complaints and other issues that only one knew about. They also need to avoid wasting each other's time with trivia.

Most of the time, the communication will be about process. Is this item ready for the Board to consider? What are the consequences of not reaching a decision at the next Board meeting? What do you think we need to accomplish at the next retreat? The talks should not usurp board decision-making.

S = Shared Leadership

The best results will usually be obtained when both the Chair and the CSO are strong leaders who can collaborate as partners rather than having one control the other. They can then act together to make the vision as reality.

The Chair and CSO should both be up-to-date on generic responsibilities of a Chair and a CSO. Keeping current and sharing information on wise practices in nonprofit governance is a key responsibility of most CSO positions.

They then get to decide how to carry out those responsibilities, and they are not bound to how it is done in other organizations or prior practices in their own. For example, many Chairs act as the key media spokesperson, but a particular chair may not feel strong in that area or may travel too much. Strengths and preferences can be accommodated as long as accountability to the Board remains clear.

The Chair is normally fulfilling a key passion; even CSOs who wholeheartedly serve a mission rarely keep showing up if no longer paid. The Chair's income is elsewhere; the CSO likely earns all or most of their income from the nonprofit. A lot of formal authority gets delegated to the CSO; the Chair employs primarily influence. The Chair is always acting on behalf of a group (the Board); the CSO position can be much more lonely. That makes interaction with other CSOs at professional development events critical. Besides, the CSO is a professional in nonprofit leadership and needs to keep up with that field in order to support the Chair and Board in this regard. Unfortunately, most Chairs take only occasional training related to nonprofit leadership.

The one thing they always have in common is being over-worked! So part of the nature of shared leadership is filling gaps rather than duplicating work and wasting effort. Besides, a Chair that micromanages makes recruitment and retention of a CSO very difficult, and a CSO that does Board work lets the Board off the hook for responsibilities such as community outreach. Something has to slip.

Many difficulties can be worked through if both respect each other in taking on a large responsibility that is unpaid for one and usually underpaid for the other, and doing their best.

O = Oversight and Feedback

The Chair should take some leadership in helping the Board focus on board-level areas of oversight – progress on the strategic plan, compliance with laws and policies, obtaining and safeguarding resources, and community satisfaction – not line by line expenditure reviews or program details. As well, the Board should have more than one source of information, as unfortunately not all CSOs are fully competent and ethical. Direct contact with auditors, consultants to the board and members of the senior management team ensure that the board receives accurate information and is not saying “but we didn't know!” to the media or court some day.

In order to focus at the strategic level, the Chair must refrain from micromanagement, and rein in any board members who try to get involved in operational details (unless the CSO has asked them to volunteer in non-board roles). The Board should give the Chair feedback on how effective their style is.

Just as importantly, the CSO is entitled to be evaluated regularly, and receive ongoing feedback. The evaluations need to be at a leadership level, in relation to strategic objectives, compliance and resources, rather than a junior task-based performance system. The Chair should take the lead. If the CSO is someday surprised by Board feedback, the Chair has not done a good enough job of regular feedback.

CSO feedback includes compensation reviews and adjustments, to ensure that they are paying fair salary and benefits for a highly stressful position requiring a wide range of leadership expertise. While the CSO is not likely working only for the money, everyone needs to pay the mortgage and feel fairly treated.

Summary

Following the CHAIR-CSO system will improve the chance of success with a relationship that effectively serves the community. I recommend that every new chair and every new CSO sit down with their counterpart and went through these points.

The CHAIR-CSO system does not protect from poor election or hiring decisions, or community changes that necessitate a different style or skill set over time. But maybe consideration of these points during the election or hiring would result in better choices. I look forward to feedback from organization ns that try it!