Perspectives of Nonprofit Board Chairs: How they Prepare for and Perceive their Role in Relation to the Board, Community, and CEO

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Abstract

In the normative board governance models used by most nonprofit boards of directors in the United States, the board chair is expected to play a significant leadership role for the board and often for the organization as a whole. However, given the importance of the board chair role, it is surprising that there is little research in the governance literature focused on the nonprofit board chair. Although there is an enormous amount of practitioner and predominately prescriptive literature on the roles and responsibilities of chairs, there is little research that supports the types of roles or board chair leadership styles that lead to effective leadership or governance practice. There is little, if any research on how board chairs perceive and prepare for their leadership role.

This study was conducted by a research team of the Alliance for Nonprofit Management’s Governance Affinity Group, a national group of nonprofit consultants, pracademics, and researchers who focus on developing new approaches to governance, conducting research on governance issues, and promoting research-based practice. The study examined two research questions to advance the sector’s understanding of board chairs and their importance to governance as well as offer practice implications for board chairs and capacity builders. The research questions are: (1) How do board chairs perceive their roles relative to the board, the organization, the community and Executive Director/CEO?; and 2) How do they prepare, or not, for the role of board chair and what did they find helpful in preparing? This study is one of the few that obtains information about board chairs, directly from board chairs themselves.

The research team developed an online survey questionnaire with 46 questions that focused on the board chair’s perceptions regarding: a) their preparation for service as a board chair, b) what resources or experiences were helpful or not helpful to them for their role as chair, c) how they were selected as board chairs, d) their role and relationship with the CEO, the board as a whole, and the community, e) their leadership style, d) their experience as a leader on the board, and; e) demographic information about their nonprofit.

The survey was disseminated in the United States from April 2014 until August 2014. There were 635 completed questionnaires received from a diverse group of local, regional and national organizations from 36 states. The survey included multiple choice, rating scale, and open-ended questions.

Findings will be presented in addition to a discussion of practice implications for capacity builders and other practitioners. Study limitations and areas of future research also will be shared.