Title: On Nonprofit Board Governance:
Do the Heroes Believe in Our Expectations?

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For more than a decade, scholars and practitioners have examined strategies that could lead to improved decision-making by nonprofit boards (Block, 2004; Krug & Weinberg, 2004; Stone, Bigelow, & Crittenden, 1999), strengthening of accountability practices (Chisholm, 1995; Holland, 2002; McDonald, 1997) in order to achieve a profound improvement in the effectiveness of nonprofit organizations (Forbes, 1998; Herman, 1990; Herman & Renz, 1998; Herman, Renz, & Heimovics, 1997; Rojas, 1990; Sowa, Selden & Sandfort, 2004).

In an effort to describe governance as a strategic decision-making process, Murray (1998) suggests that, what we know about nonprofit governance falls into normative and analytic categories. The normative literature takes the position that the final authority on strategic decision-making in nonprofit organizations is the governing board of directors (Houle, 1989; Carver, 1997). On the other hand, the analytic literature is concerned with describing the actual performance of the board member and executive director and the dynamics associated with their roles and responsibilities (Bradshaw, Murray & Wolpin, 1992; Brown, 2002; Brudney & Murray, 1998; Golensky, 1993; Middleton, 1987; Miller, 2002). Aside from categorical differences, both types can leave one with the idea that there are preferred ways for boards to comport themselves and advance governance decisions.
The preferred styles for conducting board business emanating from the normative literature includes prescriptive advice for nonprofit board members and executive directors including recipes of practice, recommended ways of motivating board members, and the avoidance or acceptance of certain roles and responsibilities -- depending on whether the focal point is the board member or executive director (Block, 1998; Carver, 1997; Chait, Holland, & Taylor, 1996; Herman & Heimovics, 1991; Leduc & Block, 1992; Widmer & Houchin, 2000). While the analytic literature may shy away from being directly prescriptive, it often describes patterns of board behavior of board and executive director interaction that leave the reader with a general belief that one pattern of behavior or interaction style is preferable to another.

In trying to determine the “one best way,” the empirical research, as well as, the prescriptive literature have looked to the central players in charge of the organization, that is, the board and executive director, and have raised questions whether they are making a substantive difference in the community on behalf of its constituency or other stakeholders. Accounting for their performance in self-reports, in measures of client and stakeholder satisfaction, or outcomes measured against established strategic objectives, are verification issues of accountability. In other words, regardless of one’s approach to determining governance success, the accountability relationship focuses attention on some set of expectations about how the board should perform and whether, in fact, it met those expectations. The imposition of those expectations can be applied by any number of stakeholders, such as regulatory agencies, funders, client groups, or the board itself. Regardless of who imposes expectations on a board, the belief that the board must adhere
to some set of specific principles or standards ---for instance, writing policies in a specific format or recruiting board members following some prescribed path --- are likely to be reflected in the analytic and normative literatures.

As a consequence of the growth in normative and analytic literature on nonprofit boards, there are schools of thought about how boards should govern, executive directors should manage, and how the executive director and board should co-exist. While scholars, practitioners and consultants pontificate and argue or defend their preferred model for improving board governance decision-making, do the subjects of our debates, that is, board members, believe in the expectations that undergird these different schools of thought? At what point are the imposed expectations or prescriptive requirements for board member behavior simply unwieldy, unmanageable or unfair? There have been some suggestions that non-profit board members are often held to unreasonable (Block, 1998), even “heroic” standards (Herman, 1989).

The purpose of this paper is to report the results and implications of a study that was designed to answer those questions, restated:  

**Do board members accept various (“heroic”) expectations and conduct themselves in ways that the normative and/or analytic literature recommends for being effective and accountable governing boards?**

**Methods**

Our survey items were drawn from the expectations that we found in both the scholarly and popular nonprofit governance literature, selected by their frequent use or by common prescriptive themes among various authors (Block, 1998; Carver, 1997; Chait,
Eighteen expectations were identified and either adopted word-for-word or synthesized and assembled to reflect the views of multiple authors. The expectations are as follows:

**Expectation 1.** The roles and responsibilities of board members should be spelled out in a board job description or in a written policy with copies distributed to all board members.

**Expectation 2.** Board members should be required to participate in the organization's fundraising activities.

**Expectation 3.** Annually, board members should personally contribute money to the organization, not just give time.

**Expectation 4.** Recruiting board members should be a year round activity, not just when there is a vacancy.

**Expectation 5.** Board members should leave the board after two or three consecutive terms.

**Expectation 6.** Board members should develop, write, and adopt organizational policies, as needed.

**Expectation 7.** Board members should attend all board meetings.

**Expectation 8.** Board members should have a developed interview process that is used with all board Candidates to personally inform the candidates about the organization's mission, goals, financial condition, and the time and effort that will be expected of them as board members.

**Expectation 9.** Besides providing information during the recruitment phase, the board should provide new board members with additional orientation and training.

**Expectation 10.** Board members should be terminated or quit if they miss three or more consecutive board or Committee meetings.
**Expectation 11.** The board should have guidelines and use them to remove board members who fail to meet the board's minimum expectations.

**Expectation 12.** Board members should be collegial by encouraging each other to participate in board and Committee meetings and invite different viewpoints including disagreement.

**Expectation 13.** The board chair should create a spirit of unity among the board and ensure that board meetings and the work of the board is effective, ethical and meaningful.

**Expectation 14.** The board should not accept everyone who wants to serve on the board. Instead, the board should have a thoughtful and deliberate recruitment process that systematically identifies the characteristics and skills that would be desired in new board members.

**Expectation 15.** Because the board has ultimate responsibility for the organization, the board should be concerned about its performance and have a formal method for evaluating individual board members and the board as a whole. These evaluations should occur at least annually.

**Expectation 16.** Annually, the board should evaluate the performance of its executive director and based on its findings, the board should either fire or reward him/her.

**Expectation 17.** If a board does not undertake to carryout substantive tasks on their own, then the executive director needs to initiate and follow through on the process, but attribute success to the board.

**Expectation 18.** The board should be expected to define and evaluate the organization's mission; approve the budget, establish or adopt plans, ensure financial controls, and perpetuate the existence of the board.

This study assessed non-profit board chairs and executive directors agreement with these expectations using a survey that included 30 questions which addressed the 18 expectations. Expectations 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 18 asked the respondents if they agreed or disagreed with the expectations when fulfillment of the expectation was aided by the executive director. Additionally, they were asked to note their agreement or disagreement when the board was to be solely responsible for fulfillment of each
expectation. With the six remaining expectations (3, 5, 7, 10, 16 & 17) respondents were reported their agreement or disagreement with the expectation without reference to executive director assistance.

To establish a context for responding to survey questions, the board chairs and executive directors were provided with a definition of Expectation, as follows:

*An expectation means that a specific task or action will always get done. If it is not done, then the board member failed in fulfilling what is expected of him/her.*

Additionally, further direction was provided:

*In answering the following, please consider what it means to have a fair and reasonable expectation of a board member's role and his/her responsibilities. Also, consider the time and effort that it takes to achieve the expectation. Is the expectation reasonable or is it a burden for the volunteer with other life responsibilities, such as family, employment, etc.?*

**Methodology Concerns**

This study made use of web-based technology for the collection of survey data. It may be that the choice of this technology contributed to the apparent low response rate. An invitational letter sent by regular mail to 3800 nonprofit organizations selected randomly from a list of over 15000 addresses without identifying specific names of either the executive director or board chairs. Incomplete addresses and returned mail reduced the sample size, to slightly more than 3200 participants. However, we cannot know how many individuals actually received our letter of invitation or attempted online access.

Without true knowledge of the number of individuals that could have responded to our written solicitation, it is difficult to ascertain a statistical response rate. We admit that not knowing the true response rate makes it difficult to debate whether our results are
protected from potential nonresponse bias. However, in this case we do not think nonresponse rate bias has affected the results of this study. There are several studies in the literature that are based on hand-selecting survey samples, inducing participation with rewards, and casting out a large net seeking individuals to select into a study frame. In many ways our approach, although originally unintended, had the consequence of narrowing the sample size with the same biases had we chosen these other methods.

**Survey Results**

A total of 290 responses to this survey were received. Ninety-nine individuals currently serving as board chairs (46 female and 53 male) and 188 executive directors (114 female and 74 male) shared their opinions as to whether they agreed or disagreed with the expectations. Agreement and disagreement were scored 1 and 0 respectively. Three responses were eliminated because the respondents did not indicate if they were a board chair or executive director. Board chairs and executive directors expressed a range of opinion about the 18 expectations. Without distinguishing between leader positions, there was agreement about the reasonableness of the six expectations that did not seek to differentiate between the expectation being fulfilled with assistance from the executive director or the responsibility residing with the board alone, (see Table 1).
Table 1.

**Expectations: not differentiating help or no help (n=287)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectation</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#03 Give money not just time</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#05 Serve only 2 or 3 terms</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#07 Attend all meetings</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#10 Terminated for missed meetings</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#16 Evaluate Exec. Director</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#17 Exec works, give Board credit</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For six of the expectations, the majority of respondents disagreed that the board should be solely responsible for fulfillment of these expectations (see Table 2).

Table 2.

**Disagreement with Expectation: when board is solely responsible (n=287)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectation</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#01 Job description</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#02 Fundraising</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#04 Recruiting</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#06 Write Policies</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#08 Interview/inform</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#09 Orientation/training</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the remaining expectations, there was agreement regardless of whether help was provided or the board fulfilled the expectations without assistance from the executive director (see Table 3).

Table 3.

**Agreement with Expectations: acting alone or with executive director (n=287)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectation</th>
<th>Board Only</th>
<th>With Executive Director</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#11 Guidelines for removal</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#12 Encourage collegiality</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#13 Chair creates unity</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#14 Deliberate recruit process</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#15 Evaluate the board</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#18 Evaluate mission &amp; policies</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Board Acceptance of Expectations

Agreement with the expectations of chairs and executive directors was examined using analysis of variance. This was accomplished by summing agreement (Cronbach's alpha=.87) for items that asked respondents their opinion regarding board responsibility when the executive director provided assistance (Table 4).

Table 4. Agreement with expectations when help is provided

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chair</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7.83</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9.68</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8.82</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ED</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10.02</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9.85</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9.95</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9.39</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9.78</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9.56</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A second summary variable (Cronbach's alpha=.91) was created for items that indicated agreement or disagreement when no assistance was provided by the executive director (Table 5).
Table 5. Agreement with expectations when no help is provided

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chair</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7.96</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7.75</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7.85</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ED</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5.61</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6.22</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5.85</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6.29</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6.86</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6.54</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The analysis of variance for the sum of questions regarding agreement when help was provided was significant for position (F=10.71, p=.001). Significant differences were also found for gender (F=5.46, p=.02), and for the interaction between position and gender (F=7.82, p=.006) which primarily reflected the lower level of agreement of female board chairs. For the sum of items that assessed agreement with expectations when the executive director provided no help, significance was obtained for position only (F=15.21, p=.001).

**Board Acceptance of Expectations**

As a group, board chairs were accepting of the prescriptive list of board expectations that were drawn from the literature. The strongest level of agreement among board chairs was the expectation that board members should attend all meetings. Since board meetings are the forum for conducting the collective work of the board and
formulating official decisions, it was not remarkable that 93% of the board chairs agreed with this expectation. However, it was surprising that it was the only expectation that reached into the ninety percent range.

In fact, the strength of acceptance for the 18 expectations varied considerably. In two cases, board chairs were evenly split. Fifty percent of board chairs agreed with the expectation that board members should be solely responsible for developing, writing, and adopting organizational policies, as needed. In addition, they were split (50% agreement) when it came to the executive director initiating and following through on substantive tasks that the board should be handling on their own. In this situation, half of the group thought it was reasonable for successful outcomes to be attributed to the board although the work was performed exclusively by the executive director.

In three other situations, board chairs were nearly evenly split on the reasonableness of what is expected of board members. In the first instance, fifty-three percent were of the opinion that board members should be completely responsible for participating in the organization's fundraising activities. In contrast, when asked whether board members should be required to participate in fundraising activities with assistance from their executive director, 78% agreed with this expectation.

In the second example, 56% of the board chairs accepted the expectation that recruiting board members should be a year round activity, not just when there is a vacancy, and the responsibility for recruitment should be handled by the board without any assistance from their executive director. When the expectation included assistance from their executive director, agreement with the expectation reached 74%. For the third item,
the response was similar with 54% of the board chairs in agreement with the expectation that the board should be solely responsible for ensuring that board member roles and responsibilities should be spelled out in a job description or in a written policy with copies distributed to all members.

In comparison to the three previous examples, another of the expectations was only marginally higher in strength of agreement (59%) when board members were solely responsible for ensuring that they have a well developed interview process that is used to inform board candidates about the organization's mission, goals, financial condition, and the time and effort that will be expected of them as board members. Board chairs were more accepting (78%) of this expectation when their executive director could help board members fulfill this expectation.

**Gender and Expectations**

The strength of the agreement varied between female and male board chairs. The most noteworthy disagreement is about the reasonableness of having guidelines and using them to remove board members. Specifically, 74% of the male board chairs agreed that the expectation was reasonable to remove board members who fail to meet the board's minimum expectations and to do so with the assistance of their executive director. In contrast, 57% of the female board chairs disagreed with that scenario. Female board chairs were more reluctant to involve the executive director (regardless of the gender of the executive director) and were of the belief that this difficult task should rest exclusively with board members. In fact, when asked about board members being solely responsible for the
removal of board members, the agreement level among women board chairs increased substantially and were almost identical to the opinions of the men for this question (see Table 6).

Table 6. 
**Removal of Board Members: Board Chairs Agreement (n=99)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>With Assistance</th>
<th>Without Assistance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A differing viewpoint was also encountered with the expectation that the board is responsible for its performance and should formally evaluate individual board members at least annually. When relying on the assistance of the executive director, 52% of female board chairs disagreed with the expectation. On the other hand, 72% of the male board chairs were in agreement with this expectation. With the idea that the board alone would fulfill this board expectation, the female board chairs shifted their viewpoint toward agreement, and a few of the male board members shifted their position to disagreement, as seen in Table 7.

Table 7. 
**Annual Evaluation of Board Members: Board Chairs Agreement (n=99)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>With Assistance</th>
<th>Without Assistance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Female and Male Board Chairs’ Preferences for Assistance

Twelve expectations were presented in which board chairs could indicate agreement using the assistance of the Executive Director. As indicated by the analysis of variance results, gender differences were noted with regard to agreement on expectation when assistance is provided by the executive director. With all twelve, women board chairs expressed less agreement than men do (Tables 4). Additionally, with eight out of the twelve expectations, female board chairs agreed more strongly in the expectation than male board chairs did, if it were to be accomplished by board members alone.

Beyond just agreement with those expectations assisted by the executive director, male board chairs demonstrated a tendency to reduce the strength of their agreement in an expectation when the executive director was not involved in helping to fulfill the expectations. A representative example is with Expectation #18. In this case, 93% of the male board chairs agreed that with help from the executive director, the board should be expected to define and evaluate the organization's mission; approve the budget, establish or adopt plans, ensure financial controls, and perpetuate the existence of the board. The strength of their agreement dropped to 72% when the same expectation was to be met by the board acting by itself (see Table 8).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Opinion of Male Board Chairs: (n=53)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Board role in Mission, Finances, Plans, Future of Board</td>
<td>With Executive Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Likewise, male board members demonstrated a marked difference in opinion with the expectation that board member roles and responsibilities should be spelled out in policy or as job descriptions and distributed to all board members. With the aid of the executive director, 83% of the male board chairs agreed. When the board was to act without the support of the executive director, the level of agreement dropped to 47% (see Table 9).

Table 9.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Board role in Clarifying Roles &amp; Responsibilities</th>
<th>With Executive Director</th>
<th>Board Only</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the area of fundraising, 85% of the men expressed agreement with their fundraising role with support of their executive director. When expected to fundraise by themselves, the male board chairs dropped their expression of agreement to 59% (see Table 10.)

Table 10.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Board role in Fundraising</th>
<th>With Executive Director</th>
<th>Board Only</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the governance role of developing, writing, and adopting organizational policies, as needed, the male board chairs viewed the support of the executive director as critically necessary, as expressed in agreement among 83% of them. Table 11 illustrates the significant reduction in the support for that expectation when the board is solely responsible for fulfilling its expectation.
Similarly, male board chairs preferred the assistance of the executive director to provide new board members with additional orientation and training (see Table 12).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 12.</th>
<th>Opinion of Male Board Chairs: (n=53)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Board Role in Orientation and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>With Executive Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Board Chairs versus Executive Directors**

The relationship between the board and executive director has long been considered a critical factor for influencing governance outcomes (Golensky, 1993; Herman & Heimovics, 1991; Houle, 1997; Leduc & Block, 1985; Miller, 2002). For this reason, we compared the opinions of executive directors and board chairs to see if they were in alignment. The results of the analysis of variance indicated an overall all difference between chairs and executive directors in their agreement with the expectations (Tables 4 & 5). In most cases, board chairs and executive directors agree with the expectations proposed for board members—whether the expectations are met through the efforts of the board acting alone or with the assistance of the executive director. However, board chairs and executive directors also have differences of opinion on how the expectations should be
achieved. In six cases, the strength of the executive directors’ disagreement about the board acting without the help of the executive director was either equal to or greater than the Board Chairs’ agreement with the expectation (see Table 13).

Table 13.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectation</th>
<th>Board Chairs’ Agree</th>
<th>Executive Directors’ Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 Job description</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2 Fundraising</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4 Recruiting</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6 Write Policies</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#8 Interview/inform</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#9 Orientation/training</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gender and position may have some bearing on one’s belief about how an expectation should be fulfilled. The responses of men and women executive directors tended to be more in accord with each other as compared to the differences between male and female board chairs. About 60% of the time, male and female executive directors thought more alike than their male and female board chair counterparts did.

Discussion

We are intrigued with two findings from this study. First, the study confirms our own impressions that board members and executive directors would express agreement with the set of expectations that mirror traditionalist models of board governance. Traditionalist views (such as, Houle, 1997) and those that reinforce hierarchical relationships (such as, Carver, 1997) have permeated the popular literature and are reinforced daily by board development trainers and consultants because the “how-to”
messages are easily transferable. While there was no surprise with the acceptance of the expectations, we found the variability in the strength of agreement in the expectations to be noteworthy. Secondly, we unexpectedly discovered some differences in how female and male board members think about board expectations and prefer to accomplish them. Male board members are more apt to agree with the expectations when they can receive assistance from their executive directors. Women board chairs prefer to go it alone.

Variations on Agreement

Trying to understand the day-to-day relationships between board members, and board members with the executive director is an immensely complicated (Fletcher, 1999) but necessary task (Block, 1998) which requires some ability to decipher human behavior. Consequently, with all good intentions of promoting organizational effectiveness, the search for understanding human behavior has led to an array of motivational and organizational behavior theories in search of “simple cookbook formulas for working with people” (Davis, 1981, p. 2). We do not refer to this search of a “cookbook” in a pejorative way; to the contrary, we personally understand the pressures of managing and governing nonprofit organizations, and we also continue to strive for the best way to manage and govern, keeping in mind a statement made by Peter Drucker (1977, p. 8) almost three decades ago, “Whether it is being done right or not will determine largely whether the enterprise will survive and prosper or decline and ultimately fail.”

Whether it is being done right or not has been a driving force for this study on expectations of board members. We have long been of the opinion that prescriptive advice
can provide some framework for improving nonprofit organizational performance (Holland & Jackson, 1998; Ingles, Alexander & Weaver, 1999) or at least can improve the chances for improvement (Brudney & Murray, 1998) with a knowledgeable and skilled executive director (Leduc & Block, 1985; Block, 1998). On the other hand, we also believe that not all advice is good advice, especially when guidelines turn into rules and norms that create barriers and restrict effective outcomes, however perceived or measured (Herman & Renz, 1999).

More specifically, our concern is that subjective assumptions about how boards should behave have become the norm. We are not troubled with the 18 expectations identified in this study, per se. Over the years, interviews with thousands of executive directors and board members led us to awareness that executive directors, consultants, and board members themselves, were labeling board members as “failures” because they did not fundamentally adhere to, or achieve all expectations on their own. Our concern is that board members (and executive directors) have become socialized to accept a belief system of expectations that require “heroic” efforts (Herman, 1989; Herman & Heimovics, 1991) of implementation in order for board members to be classified as successful and responsible.

We are of the opinion that adherence to the 18 expectations will make a positive difference in the outcome of nonprofit organizations, but we are not strict constructionists to think that a law has been violated if the expectations were not all met, or that the board has failed if it required the assistance of the executive director in order for the expectation to be achieved. Alternatively, for that matter, we see merit in the executive director
initiating assistance or working behind the scenes to help the board member be successful, even unbeknownst to the board member.

Regardless of one’s theoretical predilections about how boards should function, one thing this study has made clearer -- board members are in tune with the multitude of expectations that are found in the nonprofit literature. While it is unlikely that board chairs would dismiss expectations that have become part of the social intelligence of nonprofit board governance, the expression of variability within their responses communicates an important message. Board chairs do not view all 18 expectations with the same level of importance. Some expectations hold more weight than others. Board chairs have ranked the top three expectations they agree with as follows:

1. Board members should attend meetings.

2. Defining and evaluating the organization's mission, approving the budget, plans, financial controls, and perpetuating the board. (With help from the executive director).

3. Annually, the board should evaluate the performance of its executive director, and based on its findings, the board should either fire or reward him/her.

The three expectations that were the least accepted are:

1. If a board does not undertake substantive tasks on their own, the executive director should attribute success to the Board.

2. Board members, without assistance, should develop, write and adopt organizational policies, as needed.

3. Board members, without assistance, should be required to participate in the organization's fundraising activities.
Our study asked board members (and executive directors) what they thought about the 18 expectations and to what extent they agreed with them and whether it was reasonable to achieve the expectations on their own or with the help of their executive director. Our interpretation of the results suggests that some relaxing of judgments about board member fulfillment of expectations is in order. The variability in the findings suggests that one should not have to engage in heroic behavior to fulfill their role as an effective board member. Moreover, doing it alone is not always necessary.

Fulfilling Board Expectations: Women & Men

Women board chairs prefer to achieve board expectations on their own, while men board chairs prefer assistance from their executive director. In addition, women chairs express less strength in agreement about board expectations than men. In an attempt to interpret the reasons for this outcome, we found the professional literature of little help. There is literature to support that women are disadvantaged as wage earners or find it more difficult to break the “glass ceilings” of major corporations, but we could not find a satisfactory explanation for differences in leadership behavior.

Despite what seems to be a general belief that there are differences in the leadership styles of men and women, empirical evidence is rather sparse (Champoux, 2000 p. 230) with claims that similarities outweigh the differences (Robbins, 2003, p.139-141). However, one article (The Economist, 2003) offers a plausible explanation as to why women Board chairs are apt not to want help from either female or male executive
directors. The article suggests that women are less likely to form networks and therefore are more likely to work alone. Although why female executive directors see working with their boards, and the chairs do not, is still an open question.

Discussions with female colleagues have offered some similar and compelling views on the matter. One suggestion is that men have more experience working in teams and relying on team members for success. Another is that despite the literature’s characterization of women managers/leaders as being more nurturing and willing to share power and information, women may believe that their success requires that they demonstrate their own abilities in ways that require them to be competitive and guarded, thereby more apt to work alone and perhaps question the general rules of the game.

Conclusion

While we draw no definitive conclusions about the reason for the gender differences, these findings illuminate important patterns of agreement among organizational leaders. These differences, along with the variability in the strength of the agreements about board expectations, are a breakthrough in our understanding of board expectations.

When that traditional and bureaucratic rules reflecting heroic standards are replaced with objectivity and fairness, more tolerance for the busy volunteer, and more reliance on the professional executive director, then the successful fulfillment of board expectations can be achieved.
References


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