



## Storied Awareness

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# Leadership Postures to Guide the Board Chair and Executive Director Relationship

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Michele Reiner

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# Critical Postures for Partnership Success

Effective relationships between nonprofit boards and executive directors are critical to the long-term stability of organizations. Yet, these relationships are often fraught with conflict or unrealistic expectations, resulting in high job turnover for executive directors and frustration on the part of boards. In fact, one of our recent surveys revealed that unrealistic expectations from their board was a reason that 24% of executive directors left their positions dissatisfied.

Losing leadership quickly and without planning has a significant impact on an organization. It is expensive, fractures internal and external organizational relationships, creates gaps in institutional knowledge, and often halts progress toward long-term goals.



The partnership between the board chair and executive director sets the tone for how the board and executive director work together. Unfortunately, this relationship is often not as strong as it could be. This potential weakness can be influenced by many factors, including the goals of the organization, the experience of the executive director and board chair, the current challenges that are being faced and the history that has been experienced, both personally and organizationally.

In 2019, the Storied Awareness team interviewed over 40 former executive directors of nonprofits about their prior experiences. These interviews pointed to the understanding that it is chosen leadership postures, or the willingness to put in the *emotional labor* it takes to *nurture the relationship*, that can make or break this partnership.

The four critical postures of an effective board chair and executive director relationship are *generosity, candor, support and protection*. The beauty of these postures is that no matter the situation or skill level of the individuals involved, they are accessible and achievable for anyone willing to do the emotional work of being in a productive, authentic relationship. While not easy, any board chair and executive director, regardless of what they are bringing to the position, can influence the experience and ultimately build a stronger and more effective leadership model. In turn, being in relationship across these postures creates trust amongst the two parties, lays the framework for a strong organizational culture and allows for creative friction, rather than uncreative destruction.

## Posture One: Generosity

*“That was probably the most difficult two years of my life, [in the role] for the first time and being still pretty arrogant . . . and not having the humility to have mentors and listen to others.”*

The board hired the executive director and the executive director took the position. At this point, everyone wants to succeed and wants the other to succeed. Yet, since no one is perfect, both sides of this party are going to make mistakes and be uncertain about parts of their roles. Additionally, addressing challenges and holding tension are part of the job of a leader. Generosity lays the foundation for a strong relationship that will reap benefits down the road.

Entering into this relationship with a spirit of generosity allows each side to assume positive intention on the part of the other and seek to understand, rather than critique. Mistakes and missteps need to be acknowledged, consequences need to be accepted, situations need to be made better where they can and the pair needs to keep moving forward. This giving and accepting of generosity is a two-way street - and beneficial for both the board chair and executive director.

One 2005 study of 18 nonprofit board chairs and executive directors demonstrates the power of dynamic and reciprocal relationships. In the relationships with a high level of trust, board chairs did not feel the need to assert their authority with the executives. Instead, influence was possible for both parties based on the reciprocity experienced. In other words, maintaining an

open dialogue, and working through the process of give and take are key attributes of a solid board-executive relationship.



Generosity, which I covered in [my earlier blog](#), gives the board chair and executive director space to reflect and understand what is going on around them and between them. This improves their understanding of their roles in the organizational system, allows them to tap into opportunities they might have missed and gives them the ability to find space around challenges and find solutions that might otherwise have been overlooked.

This is easy to say, yet how does generosity show up in a board chair and executive director relationship? These are some practical ways that set the stage and allow this posture to flourish:

1. Consistently hold regular 1:1 meetings with a loose, non-judgemental agenda that allows time for the executive director to share what is going on in the role and what challenges and successes they are facing.
2. Listen with intent, reflection and attention: no devices and no need for action.
3. Give feedback, kindly and from a place of making this better together.
4. Allow each other to make mistakes in their words and actions; help the other person know that imperfection is acceptable.
5. Allow humanness to show up and live through honest sharing of reactions to situations
6. Pay attention, reflect and understand situations while you are going through them.

7. Acknowledge the executive director may still be carrying their former position, and the organization may be holding onto their predecessor.
8. Bring this spirit of consistency, reflection and acceptance to board, executive committee and committee meetings through the structure of regular and consistent meetings, clear agendas, honesty of current reality and celebration of success.

## Posture Two: Candor

*"I was in over my head a lot and having to figure things out. And so just being vulnerable and open to recognizing that you don't know it all... you've got to learn how to do this and you've got to do it in collaboration."*

No one likes to be caught off-guard, especially when they are carrying the mantle of leadership. It breeds confusion and distrust when a board chair and executive director is surprised by something the other one says in a meeting or other external situation. Alternatively, basing the relationship on candor, which you can [read more about in this blog](#), allows the pair to lead with courage and intention, rather than uneasiness and resentment.



As stated earlier, both the board chair and executive director will be uncertain about parts of their role or decisions that need to be made. Being open about these uncertainties, getting the

support you need, learning what is necessary, and continuing to practice is the path to success. Hiding, dismissing or ignoring doesn't help the individual, the relationship or the organization. Neither party must have the answer to a situation or problem, but all parties should be on the same page in order to find the right solution. To navigate an issue requires transparency and transparency builds trust, which will make this process easier to navigate in the future. In an effective board chair and executive director partnership, both sides are able to help the other continuously improve.



Candor shows up in the following ways:

1. Agree to keep each other apprised of situations, challenges and ongoing objectives, relying on the agreement of “no secrets, no surprises.”
2. Align on agendas, talking points and public materials when stepping into something together.
3. Be honest about challenges and uncertainty that you or the organization is facing.
4. Provide honest, authentic feedback to the other person with a commitment to not talking around challenging topics.
5. Hire with clarity and avoid keeping information from the prospective leader of your organization.
6. Create and agree on clear goals, clarify board expectations and understand the review process from day one.
7. Fill each other in on pertinent conversations with key constituents.

8. Ask for help when it is needed and provide help when you notice a gap.
9. Ensure that board work is done with visibility, through committees and board meetings, not through back channels.
10. Clarify the best process and avenue for the board to address gossip, share information heard ‘off-line’ so nothing festers and the board chair and executive director can ensure a proper response is crafted.

## Posture Three: Support

*“It was kind of a tough and kind of isolating position to be in, even our best board members probably weren’t lying awake at night worrying about [the organization].”*

Both the role of executive director and board chair carry lots of responsibility, which means emotions can run high. Board chairs and executive directors can strengthen their relationships by regularly offering words of support, reassurance and care.



What does this look like? In public and in private, the board chair and executive director should find ways to notice strengths in each other and mention them often. You can read more about this in my [previous blog](#). Importantly, they should also showcase these strengths to others.

Playing this role of cheerleader not only feels good - it sets the stage for success when the pair must hold the necessary conversations around constructive feedback and realignment.

Support shows up in the following ways:

1. Notice and acknowledge strengths and share them out loud, both in private and public conversations and meetings.
2. Listen and empathize with what is happening for your partner.
3. Acknowledge growth and recognize hard work: reflect on where you have each come from.
4. Remind each other of past progress and success.
5. Provide and pay for an executive coach for the executive director at minimum, and ideally, the board chair and executive director together.
6. Create annual goals together and share with the board, including organizational, professional and personal growth and remind each other of them regularly.
7. Provide regular annual reviews, as well as quarterly check-ins to goals.
8. Require professional development as part of executive director role (both self-selected and selected by the board chair based on annual review).
9. Ask (and keep asking) each other what their greatest challenge is right now and how you can help.

When asked to grade their board's ability to provide guidance and support, here's a breakdown of how executive directors responded:



You will notice that this is the only posture that includes someone external to the organization, an executive coach. This is because Storied Awareness interviewees who were able to reflect positively on their role with energy and compassion were the ones who had executive coaches. Oftentimes, an outside coach is able to help an executive director address vulnerabilities, capitalize on strengths, and manage the many layers of their role with grace. Providing a coach does not take away from the responsibilities of a board chair, but rather

allows more space for the pair to clarify goals, unlock their potential and gain more self-awareness. Those who utilized coaches felt much more supported and able to manage through the challenges of growing into a leadership position and growing an organization.

## Posture Four: Protection

*"I needed to believe that at least one person was in my corner and that there was some creative positive energy in the room...And at the time, I didn't see a single person with that sort of energy around me. And I knew I couldn't sustain it myself."*

The final posture, protection, is predicated on the fact that the first three postures are alive and well in the board chair and executive director relationship. The foundation laid through these practices allows both sides of the partnership to trust and understand the *why* behind any challenge or crisis. Even so, at some point there will be bumps on the road in the future and consequences to accept from decisions made in the past. Any leader faces challenges.



The protection posture, which you can learn more about in [my earlier blog](#), allows the partnership to be ready to defend and shelter the other - and the decisions they made, knowing the path they are on is getting them closer to reaching the organization's strategic goals around client and community impact. Trust that the best decisions were made with the information available at the time and accepting the consequences of these decisions is part of

accepting the mantle of leadership. For a nonprofit to navigate periods of change and uncertainty requires a strong partnership between the board chair and the executive director. Without that partnership, the rest of the board is likely to be disconnected or disengaged from the ongoing work of the organization and what it will take to move the organization forward.

As a Storied Awareness survey respondent said, “I can take a punch, I can ride the tough times and that's necessary. And when you're in those tough times, you've got to guard yourself to manage them and the people around you versus spending all of your management life trying to avoid those tough times.”



Protection shows up in some simple and clear ways:

1. Ensure a shared understanding of the why behind a challenge or crisis between the board chair and executive director.
2. Speak up in public and at board meetings to advocate for the leadership decisions and the current state, while also acknowledging and empathizing with the current challenge or crisis.
3. Be clear about what is being done to address the situation and communicate the path forward.

4. Remember and remind constituents about the bigger picture and goals of the organization and how the current situation fits in.
5. Ensure adequate legal and/or professional counsel when necessary.

## Conclusion

The four postures of generosity, candor, support and protection build upon each other to create a solid foundation for the relationship between the board chair and executive director. While truly leading within these postures takes self-awareness, vulnerability and courage; it does not require a specific resume, degree or experience level. Clearly articulating, rewarding and monitoring the postures can be the tipping point in executive director tenure, helping to lower leadership transitions and uncertainty while also shaping the board and organizational culture.

*We are currently developing deep-dive strategies and real-world actions to influence the postures points outlined above. For more information on where the work is headed, visit the Storied Awareness [service offerings](#) and [blog](#).*