Five Key Components for a Successful Board-Executive Director Partnership

Exceptional bar organizations carry out their missions in different ways, but hold at least one thing in common: a strong board-executive director partnership. We choose to view it as a partnership because, among the best bars, the day-to-day relationship is characterized by mutual respect for both parties’ roles and responsibilities and a constructive give-and-take. Of course, the foundation for this partnership is a chain of command outlined in the laws that govern nonprofit organizations. The board of directors has the ultimate authority and responsibility for the organization. The executive director is the board’s one employee. As such, the board is responsible for working with the executive director to ensure that he or she is carrying out those responsibilities in a way that is consistent with the board’s vision.

How do the most successful bars do that?

1. Successful bars regularly reaffirm expectations about roles and responsibilities.
   A significant amount of the confusion we see arise between a bar’s board and its executive director arises from a lack of clarity about respective responsibilities. Whether it’s the executive director who didn’t realize the board expected her to take the lead on lease negotiations or the board that thought it was appropriate to involve itself in a staff management issue, discord occurs because we may have assumed something was self-evident when it was not. A universal chart that defines decision-making authority between boards and executive directors would be extraordinarily useful. But, beyond what’s prescribed by law, roles and responsibilities vary from organization to organization and they often evolve over time. The only meaningful way to understand them is to discuss them from time to time.

   Creating a culture in which the board and executive director approach the work of the organization with a shared understanding of their respective roles doesn’t need to be complicated. A meaningful and regular board orientation combined with learning opportunities embedded into board meetings ensures all the players come to the table with a shared vision of their respective roles.

2. Successful bars collaboratively set performance goals.
   Thriving bars establish goals for the organization that then drive everyone’s performance. Given our bars’ limited resources, the board and staff must decide which of the many issues facing us deserve our attention. The most successful bars use those organizational priorities to inform the work plans and individual goals of the board, the executive director, the staff, and other volunteer leaders within the association.

   As a practical matter, the executive director’s goals are typically developed in the context of the executive director performance review. Since it would be cumbersome for the entire board to spearhead that process, the board provides input but typically delegates the responsibility to a review or compensation committee. A good performance review process provides the executive director and committee with an opportunity to discuss how the executive director can most effectively advance the organization in ways that are consistent with the bar’s strategic plan or general priorities. Specific measures of success on which the executive
director will be evaluated (such as financial or membership targets, for example) should be jointly developed and agreed upon by the executive director and the committee.

Before you evaluate the executive director’s performance, conduct an organizational review. As an organization, how did we do with our strategic plan or goals we set for ourselves? Did we all work to advance the organization in the ways to which we committed? If we did not, how might our actions (or inaction) affect others’ ability to achieve their goals? For example, a board decided to allocate $50,000 to the bar’s emergency fund. Everyone agreed it was a wise decision, but it may not be appropriate to hold the executive director accountable for a fiscal target that had been set prior to that decision.

3. Successful bars support the executive director’s learning and development by providing opportunities for reflection and constructive feedback on an ongoing basis.

Most executive directors with whom we’ve spoken report that they receive relatively little feedback about their performance, and would appreciate more. The biggest problem with most performance review processes is that they are organized as an annual event as opposed to an ongoing conversation. The review committee should consider setting aside time at least quarterly for an informal discussion about the previous few months’ activities. What went well? Is there anything that might have been handled differently? What’s on the horizon? Finally, such a conversation is also an opportunity to solicit feedback from the executive director on the board’s performance.

As an aside, we’d like to encourage any bars that are not conducting performance reviews for their executive director to consider doing so. It’s an important opportunity to talk, collaborate, provide feedback, and make sure everyone’s expectations are aligned.

4. Successful bars address problems immediately and directly.

In any relationship, problems occasionally will arise. One of the most common mistakes boards make with regard to the relationship with the executive director is avoidance. “There’s a problem, but it’s minor and not worth bringing up” or “Someone else will talk with him about it” or “It will go away” or “We’ll wait until the performance review to discuss it.” Raising a performance problem may be difficult, but failing to address it is no solution. Give the executive director an opportunity to deal with the problem and learn from it.

If the majority of the board shares a concern about an aspect of executive director’s performance, one or two board members may need to sit down with the executive director privately to discuss it. Here are a few common-sense suggestions for providing negative feedback:

- Address the issue as soon as possible. If you’ve waited until the performance review to address a problem, the board is not doing its job.
- It’s not personal. The discussion should center on the specific behavior or action at issue.
- Avoid generalities and be factual. Address what you’ve observed.
- Be direct. Don’t sugar-coat it and avoid mixed messages.
- Watch the tone. Anger, disappointment and sarcasm are counterproductive.

More information about providing both positive and negative feedback can be found here. More unorthodox, but thought-provoking suggestions can be found here.

5. Successful bars reward excellence.

The community of bar executives with which we work is deeply invested in the missions of our bar associations and foundations. Still, meaningful rewards are an important way for the organization to express its thanks for a job well done, as well as motivate the executive director for the important work ahead. Rewards typically come in the form of a salary increase, bonus or benefits, but don’t be deterred if the bar’s
budget doesn’t allow you to do as much as you would like. Time, flexibility and professional development opportunities such as those offered through NABE are alternative benefits the board can offer. Be attentive to what the executive director values and creative about expressing appreciation for the work that has been accomplished.

**In Conclusion**

It may be a cliché to say that communication is the key to a strong marriage, but the fact that it’s a cliché doesn’t mean it’s untrue. You’ll notice that most of what we’ve outlined here relates to communication, too – about mutual expectations, about performance goals, and about successes and challenges. Approached with respect and in good faith, the partnership will pay great dividends as we lead our bar organizations through the challenging times ahead.