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Opinion

You Have Been Elected Chairperson of the Board. Now What?

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David Evans

David Evans is Chairman of the Board of the world-renowned **Mojave Air & Space Port** as well as a board director of **Boardwalk Motor Car Group** in the San Francisco bay area.

One of the greatest honors and responsibilities in business is chairing the board of directors. The greatest contributors in this role strengthen the board, take no credit and always prioritize support for the CEO.

The chairperson is more critical than ever as our digital age requires organizations to be more nimble and prescient. Policies that emanate from this person will determine the direction, culture, innovation, production, compliance and accountability of the business.

If you are so lucky as to be selected for the role of board chairperson, you'll want to be certain your efforts and the efforts of those that will follow are spent providing steady leadership.

In this position, it is tempting to forget that leadership is not command authority. Though you may think your ideas are best for the company, giving orders rarely works in the public and private leadership sector. Commands to peers merely stir up negative and defiant emotions.

Improved leadership, on the other hand, will bring them along with you, or even you along with them. As President **Ronald Reagan** said, "There is no limit to the amount of good you can do if you don't care who gets the credit." Chairing the board is about "the amount of good you can do" for the company or the organization.

Leading Is Fundamental

Leading a board and getting worthwhile things done requires three fundamentals:

First, **get organized and prioritize**. Make certain your agenda succinctly covers the business necessities of the board. Only allow things on the agenda if at least two colleagues concur with their inclusion. This makes meetings more effective and keeps the business at hand front and center. Stick to the agenda and keep extraneous business items for water-cooler discussion. However, never let such a policy restrict the thoughts and ideas of your colleagues. Open, organized discussion is essential to the strength of every board.

Second, **get to know your board members**. Learn about each of them, their families and values. What is important to them in their role as a board member? What do they want to accomplish?

If they have an item you can support, help them bring it to the board and work with them to create a policy that will positively influence a desired outcome for the organization. This strengthens interpersonal relationships and the fabric that holds the company together, as those relationships will be the catalyst for positive, profitable change. Remember, the chair must be non-partisan and give everyone equal time.

Third, **help the board give direction, advice and insight to the CEO**. There is nothing worse for organizations than a CEO who feels they must "work around" their board because of its dysfunction. When the board comes to a consensus, give the CEO clear parameters, measurable goals and specific expectations. Follow up with the CEO on a regular basis to determine if those objectives are being met or need to be modified. It is important to acknowledge that the CEO is the boss, so from time to time ask what he or she needs from you and be proactively responsive.

Never be a stumbling block to the CEO's agenda or authority. Work toward becoming a building block and an asset. As you do this you will become a confidant and enhance your ability to help guide the company in the path the board desires. The CEO needs your help for the company to succeed.

Be a Catalyst

The position of chairperson is the catalyst for organizations to do great things and to become better and stronger. Great chairs bring structure and stability, providing a solid platform from which a CEO can function at their highest potential. Therein is the rub: Is your position as chair creating opportunity for the CEO to do great things? That is the food for thought in all your actions.

In closing, the opportunity to chair a corporate board of directors is one that can bring great satisfaction, but it can only be effective if you focus on these fundamentals. The future success of the board and the organization depends in large part on your leadership in these important areas.

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