



The Board Chair and the Executive Director: An Arranged Marriage

The relationship between the board chair and the executive director of a nonprofit is like an arranged marriage.* Rarely does either party get to choose her counterpart. The relationship is fraught with potential challenges. And there is a lot riding on the outcome. So how can the board chair and executive director start their relationship out right?

Here are five rules from the nonprofit marriage manual.

Don't serve breakfast in bed on the first day. Set expectations appropriately from the very beginning. By your behavior, you teach people what to expect and how to treat you. This can be negotiated over time but it is more easily done at the start. Use best practice knowledge, in the form of articles about the board chair/E.D. relationship and advice from experts, to create a firm foundation for the relationship and set appropriate expectations.

Decide who cleans the bathroom. Craft job descriptions and share them in advance, before the new board chair or executive director takes the position. Understand the appropriate division of labor, based on best practice knowledge, so there's no stepping on toes and feelings of infringement on roles and responsibilities. Unspoken assumptions about roles and responsibilities can lead to hard feelings and key tasks that don't get done.

Forget about whether you're right or wrong. Instead, ask if what you're doing is working or not working. For some of us, we have a lot riding on "being right" and doing things "the right way." But, in reality, there are lots of "right ways" as well as shades of right. When we stop valuing being right so much, we can stop focusing on explaining our position and focus, instead, on what's working. What can we do to make it work better? What will best serve the organization?

Never go to bed mad. Always keep the communication lines open. Assumptions about the intentions of others are often wrong and misunderstandings can lead to unnecessary ill will. Don't sweep conflicts under the sheets. The board chair and E.D. should have regular meetings and discuss issues as they come up. Be clear from the beginning that challenges will be handled with regular, swift, open communication.

Work on the relationship. As in all arranged marriages, a successful relationship between a board chair and an executive director is not based on chemistry. Rather, knowledge, understanding, and communication are at the core. More knowledge of the other's style and approach, more understanding of the other's experience and perspective, and more communication will improve outcomes. Both partners should understand that they are part of a team and commit to learning about and from each other and working closely together through good times and bad.

* Credit goes to Donna Byrne, Former Executive Director of A Woman's Place in Bucks County, PA, for coming to this conclusion with me over coffee one morning some years ago.

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