

Commissioner/Board Leadership:

How you as chairperson carry out your role has much to do with the success of the board. A weak chair often fails to move a board along and may be unable to save the board from indecisiveness and the tendency to dance around issues. Whereas strong chairs have been known to run roughly over dissent and participation, the point is not simply that you should be either retiring or strong. The point is that you should lead individuals to become a *leadership group* in which members never assume they can relax their responsibility because the chair will be responsible on their behalf. Here are a few tips for chairing more effectively:

1. **Be the chairperson, not an intermittent CEO.** Do your own job. The board has already designated the top administrator. Your role is to help the board do the job, not to run the organization. Be clear about the role of the board.
2. **Lead the board, not the Administrator.** Your focus should be on the board, not on staff. The administrator works for the board not for you. Only the board has the right to tell the administrator what to do or add to the board's criteria for judging the administrators performance (if you have that power). An intermediary can only detract from crisp accountability.
3. **Lead the board to define its own job.** Your purview is not to work your own agenda for the organization. Even your desire for better governance has to become the board's commitment before you can have much effect. Press the board to explore the ramifications of its moral (or sometimes legal) trusteeship and to define just what its job is. When the job is thus defined in its relatively permanent form, have the board set annual targets within segments of that job.
4. **Lead the board to design its discipline.** When you enforce the rules, it will be better if you are enforcing board's rules, not yours. Help the board examine and plan its process - how the board will deal with dissent, with renegade members, with attendance, and with coming to meetings unprepared. Decisions about rules the board chooses for itself should be written and adopted as board policy. Without group-determined discipline, either there will be insufficient discipline or you will end up personally creating it.

5. **Lead the board to evaluate its performance.** Regularly return the board to what it adopted about its own job. Has it followed through? Is it behaving the way it said it would? Be sure you stick to what the board has adopted as expectations and intentions for itself. Evaluations done apart from the job description are not as useful and may be a waste of time.
6. **Take responsibility for the agenda.** This is the board's agenda, not the staff's - so don't leave the agenda to staff. The board's job is not to look over what the staff did last month, but to get its own job done. Developing agendas for specific meetings will be easier and more board empowering if the board as a body has engaged itself - even with a broad brush - in annual agenda planning.
7. **Run participative but effective meetings.** Keep it open, but keep it moving! Encourage debate and differences; bring people out; make it acceptable to disagree. Create an atmosphere of respectful diversity. Yet do not allow the board to talk an issue to death. Using a simple poll - "How many have your minds made up already?" - can yield surprising and enlightening results.
8. **Take the long view - build capability.** Efficient meetings are important, but put your emphasis on the long-term ability of the board to govern. You won't worry too much if the board learns needed skills and insights from it...or grapples meaningfully with an important issue. The board will be less vulnerable to unhappy conditions thereafter, such as having a chairperson less wonderful than you are!

Understand servant-leadership, understand governance, and understand your board...then you will be ready to help your board understand itself.