

Field Guide: How to be an Effective Board President

By Rebecca Torpie

What's the difference between an excellent board president and a so-so one? Being an effective president requires a host of proficiencies, attributes and knowledge—it's no easy job! A mix of people skills, the talent to manage and a curiosity and willingness to develop a keen understanding of your coop's business are key traits of any good board president. From facilitation savvy, the ability to empower others in a space of understanding and growth, to presentation talents, successful board presidents are curious, knowledgeable and are constantly adding to their skill sets in the areas of governance and leadership. They are strategic thinkers, fluent communicators and support collaboration and cooperation. And they're volunteers, to boot. Wow!

Why does it matter that we have a good Board President?

Just as a co-op board is elected by the owners to work on their behalf, the Board President is a director who is elected or appointed by the rest of the directors to serve and lead the board in doing its work. If the person in the Board President role is well suited for the job, the board is better able to do its job well. As a result, the board will have the capacity to discern long-term vision and provide direction toward reaching the aspirations of the cooperative, and cultivate a positive relationship between itself and the General Manager. These things will make it much easier for the co-op to meet the needs of its owners and other stakeholders. Making sure your Board President is inspired to serve, is willing to learn and is dedicated to effective governance and good group process is important to the health of the board and the vitality of your co-op.

What does a Board President do?

First we need to understand what the Board President's job is. The job of Board President is typically outlined in your Board Process policies and might look like this:

From the CBLD policy template: C6 – Officers' Roles:

- We will elect officers in order to help us accomplish our job.
- The president ensures the Board acts consistently with Board policies.
 - The president is authorized to use any reasonable interpretation

- The president will chair and set the agenda for Board meetings.
- The president plans for leadership (officer) perpetuation,
- The president may represent the Board to outside parties.”
- The board delegates certain tasks to the President and the President is thus empowered by and accountable to the board.

What does it take to be an effective Board President?

Now we know the basic expectations of a Board President and how the role fits into the larger delegation and accountability flow of the organization, but there’s more to actually doing the job- and doing it well.

See Yourself as a Servant-Leader

It is important that board leaders be driven, not by ambition or authority, but by the desire to be in service to the board, the co-op, and the community. The key tenets of Servant Leadership (developed by Robert Greenleaf, adapted by John Carver and paraphrased here) explain the relationship between the Board and its President:

- Governance authority and accountability lies with the board as a whole, not with its president.
- We must formulate the board’s job first, and only then derive the president’s role.
In the board-president relationship, the board must unambiguously be the superior, the chairperson the servant.
- The president is charged to lead a process in which high-performance governance is the product.
- Although all board members bear a responsibility for governance discipline, the president not only guides the process but is empowered to make certain decisions.

The President is the leader in establishing and maintaining board self-discipline. .

Here are some specific activities that effective board presidents employ to move their boards in thoughtful, intentioned direction toward co-op success.

Know Your Stuff

Be very familiar with policy governance and co-op policies. Have an understanding of your co-op’s —and your board’s—history and culture. Learning the basics of your co-op’s industry and the history of co-ops makes good business sense. Reading trade publications and attending workshops or conferences can be a real eye opener to seeing the bigger picture of the sector your co-op is working in. Accessing the wisdom of other co-ops is especially important.

Have a vision for how the board can excel. How can you effectively and efficiently channel directors’ time and energy into productive, meaningful work? Understand the difference between vision for the

board and vision for the co-op as a whole. Learn to step back and think broadly as a board president, rather than as a board member. Also, knowing when to use an outside facilitator who can help bring the board together can be key to staying on track.

Know who is at the table with you. Learn what the natural talents of your board members are and let them flourish. Chances are you have a resource pool of skills and knowledge to tap into to help the co-op succeed. Understand team development ([Forming, Storming, Performing Transforming](#)). The goal is that each director develops good leadership skills. Leadership sometimes means stepping back.

Develop Your Skills

Be organized. Prepare detailed agendas for each board meeting, drawing from a collaboratively developed board calendar that clearly outlines what the board is going to work on, and when. Make sure everyone has the materials they need well in advance of the meeting, so they are truly able to come to board meetings prepared. Respect the directors' time, and if needed to do so, work hard to develop your own time management skills. Delegate tasks when appropriate; utilize the resources around you to get the job done. And try to devote just the right amount of time in your life to co-op work—too much or too little won't be helpful to you or the co-op.

Stay centered. Maintain the self-discipline to understand that everyone at the table cares about the co-op as much as you do, and listen to all ideas. Accept that people will have different opinions and try not to factionalize directors by openly hearing and welcoming those who bring outside thinking and new ideas and perspectives to the table. Develop and use your facilitating talents and instincts to balance voices in the room, bring discussions to healthy places and know how to move conversations on when someone won't let go of a point. Learn when it's time to agree to disagree, call the question, vote and go forward.

Listen actively. This requires lots of energy and constant attention. It's important to listen to what's being said behind the words to help address the deeper issues. Listening actively while facilitating can be a difficult task, so you may wish to pass off leading the meeting to another director or an external facilitator for some or all of your board meetings so you can fully engage with your board.

Foster quality relationships. A positive working relationship with your GM is vital to carrying out the vision of the co-op. It should go without saying that good intra-board dynamics will improve clarity of vision, board holism and make the GM's job of leading the co-op a whole lot easier—and a whole lot more fun.

Practice presentation skills. You're the public face of the board. Knowing how to speak articulately and with enthusiasm and passion is important to messaging the co-op story to owners and the wider community and getting them on board with the mission and vision.

Know Yourself

Understand impact vs intent. Be aware of how what you say and do impacts others, regardless of your intent. Also be aware of prejudices (“isms”), and how they might appear in the boardroom.

Be approachable and welcoming to all. GM, directors, all members—you are the ambassador of the board to the co-op. A sense of hospitality and transparency go a long way to building quality relationships and creating a shared vision and purpose.

Be willing to serve the needs of the group and the organization. Be dedicated to creating and maintaining effective group process. A good president should be both vitally important and imminently replaceable—the president makes sure that the board is positioned to succeed with the next president.

A Few Expert Tips

Here are a few tricks of the trade from seasoned board presidents.

- Talk to your owners and listen to your community.
- Encourage directors to be leaders within board and on committees
- Give yourself a break because you will mess up (and allow for comic relief!)
- Start and finish your meetings on time.
- Try to allow directors space to get a discussion going before sharing your thoughts. (Sometimes the president’s voice carries such weight that others don’t feel comfortable chiming in after them.)
- Always have something for everyone to eat at board meetings. (And don’t forget to eat something yourself!)
- Look for training opportunities to build skills in facilitation and public speaking.
- Get to know the people on your board and help them get to know each other. Make time for fun!

Discussion Questions

As a board leader, what skills and attributes are your strengths?

What skills and attributes are more of a challenge for you?

How well do you know the strengths and styles of the directors? In what ways can you encourage their participation, leadership and growth?

Resources

[Board Discipline Field Guide](#)

[Planning Calendar Template](#)

[Agenda Planning Field Guide](#)

[Planning for Board Leader Succession ORW](#)

[A Recipe for Good Board Meetings](#) Michael Healy. Cooperative Grocer. #146, January – February 2010

[Healthy Board Dissent](#) (article)

[Building a Positive Board Performance Culture](#) (article)

[Building a Positive Board Performance Culture II](#) (article)

[Leadership Training Reader](#)