



Key Leadership Tools for the Board Chair

by Martha Whitman

While the board chair holds no more power than any other director, it would be disingenuous to claim that he or she doesn't wield more influence. This situation is understandable. Ideally (or inevitably), the chair spends more time on board work than the others and consequently is more familiar with the functioning, direction, and activities of the board. However, any cooperative chair worth his or her salt is interested in building a healthy board, which is achieved when all directors believe that they too have power and influence. Three conditions must exist for all directors

to claim their leadership: a wide dispersion of power, transparency, and an assumption of mutual accountability.

The board agenda and calendar allow for the creation of these three conditions. While the chair is usually charged with creating the monthly agenda, that doesn't (and shouldn't) mean it's done in isolation. The basic agenda can derive from a board calendar approved annually by the full board. By voting on a calendar proposal each year, the board exercises democracy, transparency, and mutual accountability.

The calendar lists all regular and special board business items or activities for the coming year. This list makes it less likely that important items will fall through the cracks. It helps all directors know what's coming and better understand the flow of decisions and reports throughout the year. The calendar should include decisions such as renewing the general manager's contract, declaring a patronage dividend, and creating an annual member meeting agenda. The calendar should also list standing agenda items: member comments, management reports, meeting evaluations, and so on. So while

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the board chair pulls together the details of each month's agenda, he or she works from an agreed-upon template and the whole board is involved in identifying key action points through the year.

Where agenda creation can get tricky is when someone wants a proposal or other item included but the chair doesn't agree that it's board business. Here's where the chair does have more authority—and that's a good thing. A healthy board needs someone making such calls and keeping the

board focused, but the rest of the directors should never be without recourse. With a motion, the full board can decide to place any item onto the agenda, thereby exercising democracy, transparency, and accountability.

With the misuse of power in the wider world, it's easy to lose sight of the word's Latin root: *possum*—to be able. A board has to be able to act to bring value to the co-op. How the board agenda is created reflects one aspect of power playing out on a co-op board. As examined above, it can be done with shared authority, transparency, and accountability.