

THE THIRD SECTOR REPORT

It's Time to Listen to the Voices of Nonprofit Board Chairs

By Jeffrey R. Wilcox, CFRE

Remember standing up in elementary school and announcing what you'd like to do when you grow up?

Chances are pretty good that in the mix of shared aspirations were budding doctors, lawyers, teachers, and engineers. At that age, few children were likely to proudly announce, "One day, I'll be the chair of a nonprofit board."

Surprisingly enough, the number of people who actually have that title today sums to about one and a half million. Many of them represent the professions cited by children, but, collectively, board chairs are a rich diversity of people from all walks of life that converge in board rooms to help causes advance their mission and raise the bar for the quality of life in their communities.

Even more surprising: A significant number of board chairs came into their positions because others were unwilling or unavailable to do the job. For many, a sudden departure left a gaping void at the head of the board room table and no one was stepping up to the plate.

This is an example of just one of the many truths that have been uncovered by the groundbreaking new study, "*Voices of Nonprofit Board Chairs*," released by the Alliance for Nonprofit Management last month. For the first time, over 600 board chairs contributed their stories, struggles and accomplishments to a study that takes a deep dive into how board chairs prepare for their jobs and their views about the responsibilities and relationships that go with their titles.

Although nonprofit board chairs provide significant leadership, the study reveals that only half actually prepared for their critical roles. Of those that did prepare, their primary source of training was observing prior leaders, regardless of their effectiveness.

Very few board chairs report having received formal training, using the internet for resources, or reading books or magazines on the subject of nonprofit leadership. A major finding of "Voices" was that even though accountability for nonprofit organizations to the communities and constituents they serve is an increasing focus, most board chairs have little contact with them.

According to Dr. Judy Freiwirth, chair of the Governance Affinity Group for the Alliance for Nonprofit Management and a member of the Research team that produced the report, "While advocacy and community engagement are considered critical governance roles for board members, this study revealed that board chairs seem to spend most of their time isolated in the board room."

There may be good reason for this: Nearly one-fourth of the participating board chairs came into their positions less than a year after becoming a board member. More than half ascended to the chair position in less than three years.

The Alliance's research has put into the limelight what most of the Third Sector has known for years. The meticulous research approach that Freiwirth and her research team used to capture the voices of today's nonprofit board chairs should put most organizations and board chairs at ease that they are not as alone or as unique as they may have thought.

The clear message is that intentional preparation for assuming the board chair job and making the topic of succession planning a part of a nonprofit's culture are critical. No longer can the mere mention of succession planning be disguised as code for it's time for someone to move on. That form of passive-aggressive behavior in nonprofit board rooms has left future leaders and their boards ill-prepared for generative conversations aimed at planned evolution.

The researchers suggest that nonprofits must provide more accessible resources to their current and future board chairs such as training, coaching and mentoring. The authors also contend that rather than relying on one individual to fulfill all of the board responsibilities, shared leadership models are a critical consideration. They also rightfully point out that active engagement in advocacy and interfacing with the organization's communities and constituencies are vital prerequisites before handing anyone the gavel.

In the end, the voices we are hearing today from board chairs are the same voices their children are hearing. None of us can afford to have a generation of children stand in their classes and proclaim the one thing they don't ever want to be is a nonprofit board chair.

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