

Successful Board Chair-CEO Partnerships

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By: Interviews by Samantha Whitehorne

Trust. Communication. Compromise. These are three fundamentals of any relationship, including the one between association CEOs and their board chairs. According to the three pairs interviewed for this article, if you lack any of these elements, it can have ramifications for the association's well-being. In the next few pages, you'll hear them discuss what makes or breaks a successful partnership, conversations that have been critical to the success of their board/chair relationship, and what they've learned from each other.

Trust, Shared Purpose

Association: California Judges Association

Location: San Francisco

CEO: Stanley Bissey

Board Leader: Judge Keith D. Davis

Associations Now: What do you think is the key to a successful CEO/board leader relationship?

Stanley Bissey: Like any relationship, trust and communication. We don't necessarily have to be best friends, but mutual respect for each other and our roles within the organization and the ability to verbalize any possible issues before they become all consuming is key.

Keith D. Davis: The three things I think are most important are trust, candor, and excellent communication. We need to be able to speak candidly with each other about issues important to the association, we need to have regular and effective communication to ensure we can address potential concerns before they grow into significant issues, as well as to further the mission statement of our association, and we need to trust each other to take care of our respective duties accordingly.

How do you both stay in regular contact with one another?

Davis: For routine matters, or simple scheduling items, email is fine. For matters which are or may become issues of concern to the board, phone calls are essential. There is no substitute for such direct communication; the discussions will be more beneficial to us both, and we'll be able to handle any new issues that our discussion might generate.

Did you both come in having similar communication styles, or did you have to learn how to best communicate with one another? If the latter, how did you handle it?

Bissey: From a staff perspective, I think you have to adapt to your elected leadership and how they prefer to interact. Again, though, nothing is as effective for me as a simple phone call.

Davis: Because I've known and been involved with [Stan] for seven years at various organizational levels, we've been able to forge a superb working relationship. We speak frequently, we know we can be candid with each other, and we trust each other completely.

What conversations have you had during the term that stand out to you as being critical to the success of your relationship?

Bissey: I remember very early on Judge Davis made it clear that he would always listen to anything I had to say and to any advice or insight on issues that the association and board happened to be dealing with. That openness to be frank and honest without fear of going too far out on a limb set the stage for what I believe has been a very successful collaborative relationship thus far.

Every relationship has its inevitable rough spots. How have you managed these circumstances when they've come up?

Bissey: I stop taking his calls. No, seriously, I get a new president every year. Any successful association executive has to be able and willing to adapt to the member leadership and to accept what your board and officers decide even after my opinion has been heard.

Davis: I count myself very fortunate because I recall no such rough spots. Certainly, our association has had to deal with some difficult issues, which I suppose could lead to some friction between a CEO and board president, but we understand that we must work through such difficult issues together to continue to move our association forward. ...

Looking back, is there anything you wish you would have done differently?

Bissey: [There are] some issues [where] I wish I had shared my opinion, even when it was contrary to the prevailing wisdom, so that my president and the board would know where I was coming from. But as I have grown in my role and comfort level, that has been less and less of an issue.

Davis: From my perspective, no. My term is so brief—one year—that I have to hit the ground running. I have had to navigate some contentious matters already, and [Stan's] assistance has been essential for me to successfully do so.

What advice do you have for other CEO and board leaders on maintaining a healthy partnership?

Bissey: Start early. If you don't know each other, make an effort to find some common ground and to agree on one or two things you both want to accomplish together. A shared purpose and common goal can set the stage for a solid year as a collaborative team.

Respect, Encouragement, Support

Association: Oklahoma Primary Care Association

Location: Oklahoma City

CEO: Greta J. Stewart, MPH, CAE

Board Leader: Trilla Frazier

Associations Now: What do you think is the key to a successful CEO/board leader relationship?

Greta J. Stewart, MPH, CAE: Based on my 17 years of doing this, I would say clear and frequent communication. It's really that simple.

Trilla Frazier: I think it's for the board to stay out of the day-to-day operations of the organization. That's a very big one.

How do you both stay in regular contact with one another?

Stewart: We email, we call. Sometimes daily, sometimes multiple times [a day], and sometimes weekly. Every now and again, it's a few weeks that we go without speaking, but that's rare.

Did you both come in having similar communication styles, or did you have to learn how to best communicate with one another? If the latter, how did you handle it?

Stewart: Although we hadn't known each other for very long, it became clear very quickly that we are kindred spirits. We just clicked, and that's just a bonus because it's not a requirement.

What conversations have you had during the term that stand out to you as being critical to the success of your relationship?

Stewart: During challenging periods, we discussed the issues and how to best tackle them. We worked methodically to deal with things.

Frazier: I agree, and in addition, I think that conversations that we've had to have that have been of a confidential nature, well, we've both had enough trust in each other to know we could speak candidly and things would be kept confidential.

Every relationship has its inevitable rough spots.

How have you managed these circumstances when they've come up?

Stewart: We speak candidly, and we always work toward resolution. It's important for a chief staff officer and chief staff executive to work from a position of trust—and the respect comes after that. We are both very mission minded and knew we had a lot to do, so we worked at trying to get things done in the most appropriate manner.

Frazier: We both entered into anything with an open mind. Neither of us had to be right or thought we had the only answer. Greta's had a lot of patience with me, and I think there's been respect, encouragement, and support.

Looking back, is there anything you wish you would have done differently?

Stewart: I just wish she didn't have to term out.

Frazier: I share a similar sentiment, Greta. I wish we had more time.

Stewart: We were so good at getting things done, and it takes some time to break in new folks. We have great people coming up, but it takes time to really cultivate those relationships.

What is one thing you have each learned from the other?

Frazier: I definitely learned professionalism from Greta.

Stewart: Trilla demonstrates amazing calm and diplomacy. Sometimes when people didn't share our mission, she never let them get under her skin or see her sweat.

Frazier: They definitely got under my skin.

Stewart: Well, you didn't show it, and in a male-dominated world, it's so important for women executives to stay cool, even if a meltdown is well deserved. Trilla always did a good job of that. She's my "she-ro."

What advice do you have for other CEO and board leaders on maintaining a healthy partnership?

Stewart: Communicate proactively. You know, you can communicate and not get things said. It's important that they understand and share the mission. When boards flip over, orientation is critical, and updates and reminders need to be shared so that people keep learning and the board can put on its association hat when it's time to meet.

Another thing we have to learn is appropriate assertiveness in order to be effective. And it has to be assertiveness as opposed to aggressiveness.

Frazier: Both parties need to know their boundaries. And by that I mean the board leader cannot to be involved in the day-to-day business of the association. And the CEO needs to have a clear understanding of what is board and what is staff. If it's one of those gray areas, that's where communication comes in. If you can talk about it, you can work it out.

Another thing is no surprises. No one likes them. People think you can hide something, and it will go away, but it never does.

Understanding, Constant Conversation

Association: Teachers of English to Students of Other Languages, Inc.

Location: Alexandria, Virginia

CEO: Rosa Aronson, CAE

Board Leader: Brock Brady

Associations Now: What do you think is the key to a successful CEO/board leader relationship?

Rosa Aronson, CAE: Communication. I think one of the things that makes us a little bit different is that we don't draw a very hard line between the board president's responsibilities and chief staff executive's responsibilities. I know that runs counter to some who believe there should be a very hard line. But since I am fairly new, to both associations and to the position, it has served me very well, and I hope it has served the board very well.

Brock Brady: Respect and trust and deference—to a certain extent—are very important. While we don't have a hard line between policy and management, one of the key things is to be constantly thinking about who has what role and what responsibility so that you don't overstep. If you can't do that, you can't have the type of flexibility we have now.

How do you both stay in regular contact with one another?

Aronson: It's mostly email, but for the first few months, we did have a weekly call. But then we realized we were so in touch with email, we lost the need for that call.

Did you both come in having similar communication styles, or did you have to learn how to best communicate with one another? If the latter, how did you handle it?

Aronson: I think we were really lucky in that we didn't really have to establish any roles or rules. It actually happened really naturally. I also think that having attended the CEO Symposium cemented the relationship.

Brady: We practically have identical email habits and styles. We both do it really early or late at night, which really helps.

What conversations have you had during the term that stand out to you as being critical to the success of your relationship?

Aronson: Because I was completely new to the position and association, I had so much to learn. Brock was available to answer questions. I can't remember a precise conversation that led us to where we are, but I really think it was a combination of things.

Brady: I agree. As we are getting to know each other, we are always paying attention to little signals very carefully, so we don't have to have those big conversations at the last minute.

Aronson: There's never been a gap that has led us to say, "Whoa, what's going on?" It's been a constant conversation and working together.

Looking back, is there anything you wish you would have done differently?

Aronson: Not really. The association that I came from was very staff driven, which is good in some ways. What makes a strong association is a tight collaboration between management and the board. ... Many brains are stronger than one, and that's what I really appreciate about being here.

Brady: Because of Rosa's willingness to be open and make things interactive, the board feels like it has more participation and that things are much more interactive than they have been in the past.

What is one thing you have each learned from the other?

Aronson: Learning about another person is not something that you quantify; it's a mix of style and interests and background. One of things that makes me feel particularly close to Brock is that he's a French speaker, and that's my native tongue. There's a natural affinity that makes the relationship comfortable. It's not something that I learned, but it's something's that's made me at ease and comfortable with him.

Brady: I agree. The fact that we share two cultures is sort of peripheral, but I think it brings an extra level of understanding, which you might not predict, and [it's] something that has brought us closer.

What advice do you have for other CEO and board leaders on maintaining a healthy partnership?

Aronson: Be flexible. Don't go in with some preconceived notions about your roles. Be open. Know that you have many things to learn, no matter what side you are on.

Brady: I would second all of that. One thing I would add, from a board perspective, is to appreciate and respect all the good work that the management side does.

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