

TRUST BETWEEN THE CEO AND BOARD CHAIR TRANSCENDS ALL

The CEO and board chair relationship is the most important relationship in the company. I have seen chairs and CEOs who disagree, who have had to navigate their way to a common strategy, who have sought my advice in approaching a sensitive situation with the other, and in all cases, they have a foundation of trust.

The bulk of the responsibility lies with the board chair.

It may sound like common sense and obvious, but it is by no means a given situation. While both parties have a responsibility to build that trust, the bulk of the responsibility lies with the board chair.

The best board chairs undertake the following actions. They invest the time to really get to know the CEO. Demands on directors and board chairs have increased exponentially over the last decade. As a board chair, you need to have sufficient capacity to invest in time with the CEO. Ask the CEO what they expect of you. What has worked well with prior chairs? What did not work well? What does the CEO see as her or his responsibilities to you as the chair? How does the CEO best like to be communicated with and how often?

The best chairs listen for what is not being said and watch body language. They do not respond solely to what is actively communicated to them. They make

themselves available for phone calls at any and all times, to respond to issues or concerns before they mushroom. They have the CEO's back.

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When a CEO was falsely accused of having an affair with an executive, in the early days, before the investigation was complete, the board chair offered their complete faith in and support for the CEO. They told the CEO that they had their back, and they navigated the sensitive communication with other directors. They kept the CEO informed throughout the investigation, not of the results of the investigation, but the status and expected timeframe for completion. The CEO was very grateful for this support. More importantly, it enabled the CEO to focus somewhat more easily on running the company during a time of considerable stress.

What was the downside? If the board chair learned that her faith was ill-founded, she would have rapidly taken the appropriate actions. By first demonstrating trust, and then investigating and confirming, the CEO, the executive team and the company all benefitted.

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