

Refurbishing Your Chair

By E. Grant MacDonald



Would you be surprised that a recent study revealed that 73% of board chairs would welcome feedback on their performance? How about that this majority crossed gender, organization type and even board chair experience categories? Such a finding opens the door to dramatically improving how well a board functions and to seeing the changes quickly.

Ok, no such study exists. It is likely though that board chairs ARE open to a little help in improving their effectiveness. Such improvements could include a better understanding of their board's overall leadership needs as well their own efforts around the board table and away from it.¹

Board chairs do not get much feedback. Often board members and executive directors feel it is not their place. Many would even say, "We are lucky just to have someone willing to serve in this role".

Tiptoeing around the work of the board chair can sentence boards to years of poor or at least mediocre performance. An ineffective chair not only makes for unsatisfying meetings, it also can make it difficult to find new directors and to keep them. Poor board chairs also means executive directors spending more time than they need to on the work of the board.²

Perhaps its time to refurbish the chair or, in the 17th century old English meaning of the term "furbish", that is to give it some polish. It is not that difficult.

Is chairing experience important?

Many boards assume that having chairing experience, perhaps on other boards, is important in performing the role well. Past experience, if it is good, certainly makes it more likely that someone would volunteer for the job. However, past practice can be overrated.

Non-profit boards need different things from their chair depending on the board culture, the composition of the board, and the particular issues the organization and board are currently

Note: *This governance guide is a slightly edited version of a July 2018 article of the same name on my blog www.governinggood.ca*

grappling with. Even with past experience, nothing beats the value of an annual conversation about what one expects in one's board chair. Read on.

Role descriptions and board-self evaluations

It is certainly valuable in being clear about the role of board officers, the chair specifically. A written role description certainly helps. It ought to speak to the chair's role beyond managing board meetings as well as the limited power of the position.³

An annual board self-evaluation is a recommended practice and can provide an opportunity for the chair to get some feedback. So, if you have a good template and conduct these once and awhile, your chair ought to get some useful suggestions on their leadership. But waiting up to a year to address any chairing concerns, big or small, may be too long for most boards.⁴

Effective feedback

Before looking at chair feedback specifically, a review of the characteristics of effective feedback in general is important to understand.⁵

Many people would say there are three types of feedback: negative, positive and constructive. Offering feedback according to these "types" are not nearly as useful as feedback that is:

- *Specific*: The feedback should relate to a specific behaviour or set of circumstances that can be described
- *Timely*: The feedback should be given as soon after the behaviour (effective or not) is exhibited or the situation has happened.
- *Actionable*: The feedback must contain ideas or suggestions that can be applied
- *Candid and trustworthy*: The feedback should be offered by someone trusted and respected.
- *Goal-oriented*: The feedback be couched in the idea of goals or better results
- *Future-focused*: the feedback should focus on future situations and improvements, not dwell on what has already happened.
- *Confidential*: In many situations, certainly one-on-one situations, feedback should be offered privately

In the board leadership context a bit of a planned approach is best. A few questions can be used to open up the door to a friendly conversation aimed improving the function of the chair.

Chair-initiated feedback

The easiest way for a board chairs to get feedback is to invite it. All this really requires is a few open-ended questions. Lets start with the *chair's work in the boardroom*.

If you are the chair try asking the following three questions to your Board. Read them, or better still, put them on a piece of paper and distribute copies around the table. Give the group 2 or 3 minutes to consider them and then listen to their comments and suggestions.

1. What do you like about my approach to chairing our meetings?
2. What would you like to see more of, or less of, in terms of how I manage our meetings?
3. Are there other things we might do collectively to improve our meetings?

Yes, the first question provides an opportunity for positive feedback, the others for more constructive comments. The real objective here is starting the conversation. A quiet reflective moment by each director before answering is crucial.

Upon hearing from your directors, make a commitment to the group to experiment with some adjustments in your board practices, starting perhaps with the next meeting if you cannot make any changes in the moment. To be sure, such questions will not get at more intractable issues around the board table but the asking may pave the way for more confidential discussions.

Don't assume board members will not openly provide you with particularly useful ideas. But even if there are no ideas for improvement, the fact that you have raised the matter means the topic is now an acceptable one to talk about.

What about the *chair's work outside the boardroom*? Here it is most useful to focus of your relationship to the executive director. The two of you should sit down with one another. The questions posed by the chair here might be:

1. What things could the two of us pay more attention to in order to improve how the board itself functions?
2. I am wondering about the balance of time we spend talking about current operations and more strategic issues facing us this year and next. Do we need to adjust this?
3. What would you like to see more of from me in terms support and advice. Given we both have other commitments what could we spend less time on together?

Executive director-initiated feedback

Executive directors can also help improve their board's chair's performance. Yes, it may depend there being some trust present. If there is, the ED should extend an invitation to the chair to talk about how they might work together better. Schedule a meeting if you do not have one booked already. Frame your request as a chance to meet to talk about the board and how together the two of you might make some improvements in your approach to leadership.

Consider some, but not all, of the following questions or come up with your own

- What board issues do you see need some attention?
- I am hoping you have some ideas. I have some suggestions of my own that have to do with better planning of our board meetings.
- What can we do differently in the board meetings to encourage more engagement?
- What about our own interactions? How do you feel about them? Are we making the best use of our conversations?
- Might we set up a regular monthly meeting between us, by phone or in person?
- I was wondering if we might give greater attention to planning the board's work and less on reflecting on, or managing the operations.
- Should we try to be more intentional in what matters should go to the board and what doesn't need to?
- I am wondering about my monthly report to the board. Does it provide the right information? What do you think? Could we take this question to them?
- Do you think our board meeting agenda's have too many items? I have some ideas we could try out.
- Do you have any advice for me on my interactions with the whole board or any individual members?

These questions will at least give the executive director some ideas on how the conversation might be framed.

A leadership conversation

The idea of initiating a conversation about your board's chairing needs is an easy route, although seldom taken, of polishing up your organization's leadership practices and your board's governance experience.

¹ A related USA study might be the one by Debra Beck, Gayle Gifford, Judy Freiwirth, Mary Highland and Michael Burns for the Alliance of Nonprofit Management. It is titled [Voices of Board Chairs: A National Study on the Perspectives of Nonprofit Board Chairs](#). A good summary appears in *The Nonprofit Quarterly*, October 12,

² In addition to adding to the work of the executive director, an ineffective board chair also results in executive directors having more influence over the board than they probably should.

³ You will find some resourced at www.GoverningGood.ca. The following Governance Guides here may be of value: *Chairing a Board Meeting*, *Ten Tips for Improving Board Meetings* and *How Boards Can Have Better Conversations*. Under Sample Policies see my *Board Chair Job Description*

⁴ Board evaluation, or board self-evaluation, is much touted good practice. There are a few self-assessment tools that I like. One is from [Community Literacy of Ontario](#) who maintains excellent resources on non-profit governance. Compass Point's Jan Masaoka wrote a good piece in 2005 on [Self Assessment of the Board](#) in their Board Cafe blog. There is a terrific online board self-assessment, secure and confidential, called [Board Checkup.com](#). Finally, there is my own customizable [Board Self- Assessment Questionnaire](#) on GoverningGood

⁵ Lots of advice on effective feedback can be found online. Some of it relates to workplace situations, some to educational ones. A useful piece is one written by Grant Wiggins, [The Seven Keys to Effective Feedback](#) in the *Journal Educational Leadership*, Vol 70, No.1, 2012