

**WOMEN AND MEN AS BOARD CHAIRPERSONS:  
THEIR ACCEPTANCE/REJECTION OF EIGHTEEN EXPECTATIONS  
DESCRIBED IN THE NONPROFIT LITERATURE**

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*This article reports on the findings of a survey conducted to determine whether male and female board chairpersons' accept or reject the board role expectations as expounded in the nonprofit normative and analytic literature. The roles and responsibilities and popular "do's and don'ts" that populate the literature were synthesized into eighteen role expectations. Ninety-nine (46 female and 53 male) nonprofit board chairpersons completed an online 30-item questionnaire designed to ascertain their level of agreement about adhering to the 18 expectations. Board chairpersons' agreements with the 18 expectations were analyzed using analysis of variance. Two findings from this study are especially intriguing: when male board chairpersons receive assistance from their executive directors, they are more apt to agree with the expectations culled from the nonprofit board literature. In contrast, women board chairpersons prefer to achieve the expectations without any help.*



The expansive literature on nonprofit boards has been a vehicle for reinforcing popular ideas and promoting beliefs about the best way for board members to govern (Brown & Guo, 2010; Herman & Van Til, 1989; Widmer & Houchin, 2000). In 1983, there were approximately 200 volumes on nonprofit organizational management identified by using three major bibliographic sources (Block, 1987). Today, Amazon.com lists over 1,200 titles on nonprofit boards and related nonprofit management topics. Due to this burgeoning nonprofit literature, it is understandable that certain ideas, theories, and board models advanced by various authors would share some common ground.

Over time, several shared ideas about board member behaviors have become accepted as norms and symbolic of what it means to be a worthy and committed board member, such as making financial contributions and not missing board and committee meetings. Contributions and attending meetings are just two of numerous published ideas that have become expectations for individuals serving on nonprofit boards of directors. In fact, Herman (1989) concluded that board members must engage in "heroic behavior" to accomplish all of what is expected of them. Indeed, there are many challenges to being an effective board member, including balancing the legal responsibilities as a volunteer with the personal responsibilities of a job, family or other important life events (Nesbit, 2012).

Although the research literature on nonprofit boards has flourished, the extant literature is scarce in its body of empirical research in three areas: the role of the board chairperson, the differences and similarities between male and female board chairs, and how role expectations shape how boards of directors enact their responsibilities. Harrison and Murray's (2012) enlightening study stands out because it does tackle the subject matter of nonprofit board chairs. They found that effective board chairs were able to balance their use of influence and exert their leadership power because of the quality of their relationships with other board members and the CEO. Their study has no mention of gender. Other research findings assessed the transactional qualities (Ronquillo, 2011) of board members as leaders. For example, Jager and Rehli (2012) examined the power relationships between the board chair and executive director and found that a balance of power between the roles is advantageous. Instead of considering the balance of power between the CEO and board chairperson, Iecovich and Bar-Mor (2007) were interested in knowing which leadership role was dominant and influential. Their sample chose the CEO. Kearns (1995) found that chairpersons and executive directors preferred similar traits and characteristics in their choice of board members. However, his study did not report on the preferred attributes of a board chairperson.

One of the dimensions that the normative and analytic literature has in common is the paucity of information on women as board chairpersons. One of the lone references came from Pynes (2000). She identified 25 female board chairpersons in her study on gender differences of executive directors of nonprofit organizations in a Midwest community. While the professional literature has increased its studies on women in board positions in both the corporate (Nielsen & Huse, 2010) and nonprofit sectors (Bradshaw, Murray & Wolpin, 1996; Gibelman, 2000; Odendahl & O'Neill, 1994; Pynes, 2000, Themudo, 2009), a keyword search using *Summon*, a search engine serving as a gateway into three university libraries extensive electronic and print collections, produced no results of peer-reviewed studies on gender differences of board chairs or women as nonprofit board chairpersons.

The role of board chairperson has been a popular topic in the prescriptive literature. In Houle's (1997) considered opinion, the board chair is ultimately responsible for the effectiveness of the governing board, while Carver states that the chairperson is "responsible for the integrity of the board process" (Carver, 1997, p. 143). Overall, there appears to be universal agreement that the role of the board chair is one of leadership, characterized by an ability to facilitate and engage the board members during its meetings (Harrison & Murray, 2012; O'Connell, 2003). However, the prescriptive literature, too, does not address gender, other than to suggest the importance of achieving diversity among board members (Bradshaw & Fredette, 2012; Brown, 2007; Daley, 2002).

This article reports on the findings of a survey on nonprofit board chairpersons' acceptance of board role expectations. Four key questions propelled this study:

1. Do nonprofit board chairpersons accept the board role expectations described in the professional literature?
2. Are the behaviors of board members and board chairpersons consistent with the expectations that board scholars equate with the role of the board?

3. Are there differences in the way that female and male board chairpersons execute their board role?
4. Do female and male board chairpersons rely more or less on their CEO to accomplish governing responsibilities?

## METHOD

Thus far, we have advanced the idea that board scholars established board role expectations. They also created a conceptual distinction between board members considered effective and loyal, from board members deemed ineffective or noncommittal. The key difference between being an effective or ineffectual nonprofit board member, according to Wright and Millesen (2008), is role clarity. They found a direct relationship between role clarity or role ambiguity and the strength of a nonprofit board members' engagement.

Role expectations are an important component in psychological studies of work role requirements (Dierdorff & Morgeson, 2007) because they serve as antecedents of role behavior (Jackson, 1981) in the work place. The construct of role expectations in the workplace is applicable to the role behaviors of nonprofit board members and board chairpersons.

The first step in this discovery was to identify the numerous board member expectations that authors advanced through the scholarly and popular governance literature (for example, Carver, 1997; Chait, Holland & Taylor, 1996; Conrad, 2003; Herman & Heimovics, 1991; Houle, 1997; Inglis, Alexander & Weaver, 1999; O'Connell, 2003). The roles and responsibilities and popular "do's and don'ts" that populated the literature were synthesized into 18 expectations, as follows:

**Expectation 1.** The roles and responsibilities of board members should be spelled out in a board job description or in a written policy with copies distributed to all board members.

**Expectation 2.** Board members should be required to participate in the organization's fundraising activities.

**Expectation 3.** Annually, board members should personally contribute money to the organization, not just give time.

**Expectation 4.** Recruiting board members should be a year-round activity, not just when there is a vacancy.

**Expectation 5.** Board members should leave the board after two or three consecutive terms.

**Expectation 6.** Board members should develop, write, and adopt organizational policies, as needed.

**Expectation 7.** Board members should attend all board meetings.

**Expectation 8.** Board members should have a developed interview process that is used with all board candidates to personally inform the candidates about the organization's mission, goals, financial condition, and the time and effort that will be expected of them as board members.

**Expectation 9.** Besides providing information during the recruitment phase, the board should provide new board members with additional orientation and training.

**Expectation 10.** Board members should be terminated or quit if they miss three or more consecutive board or Committee meetings.

**Expectation 11.** The board should have guidelines and use them to remove board members who fail to meet the board's minimum expectations.

**Expectation 12.** Board members should be collegial by encouraging each other to participate in board and Committee meetings and invite different viewpoints including disagreement.

**Expectation 13.** The board chair should create a spirit of unity among the board and ensure that board meetings and the work of the board is effective, ethical and meaningful.

**Expectation 14.** The board should not accept everyone who wants to serve on the board. Instead, the board should have a thoughtful and deliberate recruitment process that systematically identifies the characteristics and skills that would be desired in new board members.

**Expectation 15.** Because the board has ultimate responsibility for the organization, the board should be concerned about its performance and have a formal method for evaluating individual board members and the board as a whole. These evaluations should occur at least annually.

**Expectation 16.** Annually, the board should evaluate the performance of its executive director and based on its findings, the board should either fire or reward him/her.

**Expectation 17.** If a board does not undertake to carryout substantive tasks on their own, then the executive director needs to initiate and follow through on the process, but attribute success to the board.

**Expectation 18.** The board should be expected to define and evaluate the organization's mission, approve the budget, establish or adopt plans, ensure financial controls, and perpetuate the existence of the board.

To represent the opinions of board members, the survey was limited to board chairpersons who self-selected into the study. An assumption was made that board chairs would be the most engaged players on nonprofit boards of directors and most likely to adhere to the 18

expectations. After agreeing to participate, 99 (46 female and 53 male) nonprofit board chairpersons from throughout Colorado were given a Web address to access an online 30-item questionnaire designed to ascertain their level of agreement about adhering to the 18 expectations. For Expectations 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 18, the questionnaire provided the respondents with an opportunity to note agreement or disagreement with the expectations when the executive director aided the board in the fulfillment of the specific expectation. In addition, questions were included that would help determine if there was agreement or disagreement when board members were solely responsible for the fulfillment of each specific expectation. With Expectations 3, 5, 7, 10, 16 and 17, board chairs could report their agreement or disagreement with these six expectations without any reference made to the board acting alone or receiving help from their executive director. Agreement and disagreement were scored one and zero, respectively.

## RESULTS

Board chairpersons' agreements with the 18 expectations were analyzed using analysis of variance. This was accomplished by summing agreement (Cronbach's  $\alpha=.87$ ) for items that asked respondents their opinion regarding the board member's responsibility to achieve an objective when the executive director provided assistance (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1: AGREEMENT WITH EXPECTATIONS WHEN HELP IS PROVIDED**

Position	Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Chair	Female	7.83	4.34	46
	Male	9.68	2.93	53
	Total	8.82	3.75	99

A second summary variable (Cronbach's  $\alpha=.91$ ) was created for items that indicated agreement or disagreement when no assistance was provided by the executive director (see Table 2).

**TABLE 2: AGREEMENT WITH EXPECTATIONS WHEN NO HELP IF PROVIDED**

Position	Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Chair	Female	7.96	3.92	46
	Male	7.75	3.92	55
	Total	7.85	3.90	99

The analysis of variance for the sum of questions regarding agreement when help was provided was significant for position ( $F=10.71$ ,  $p=.001$ ). Significant differences were also found for gender ( $F=5.46$ ,  $p=.02$ ), and for the interaction between position and gender ( $F=7.82$ ,  $p=.006$ )

which primarily reflected the lower level of agreement of female board chairs. For the sum of items that assessed agreement with expectations when the executive director provided no help, significance was obtained for position only ( $F=15.21$ ,  $p=.001$ ).

### BOARD ACCEPTANCE OF EXPECTATIONS

Board chairpersons approached the 18 expectations with critical thinking and assigned different levels of importance to the expectations. Board chairs ranked their top three expectations as follows:

- 1.(#7) Board members should attend meetings.
- 2.(#18) Board members should define and evaluate the organization's mission, approve the budget, plan, ensure financial controls, and perpetuate the board.
- 3.(#16) The board should evaluate the performance of its executive director, and based on its findings, the board should either terminate or reward him or her.

The three expectations that received their lowest level of agreement included:

1. (#17) If a board does not undertake substantive tasks on their own, the executive director should attribute success to the board.
- 2.(#6) Board members, without assistance, should develop, write and adopt organizational policies, as needed.
- 3.(#2) Board members, without assistance, should be required to participate in the organization's fundraising activities.

As a group, board chairs were generally accepting of the conventional board expectations culled from the literature, although the strength of acceptance for each of the 18 expectations varied. Fifty percent of board chairs agreed with the traditional governance expectation that board members should be solely responsible for developing, writing, and adopting organizational policies, as needed. In addition, they split equally when it came to the executive director initiating and following through on substantive governance tasks that the board should be handling on their own. In this situation, half of the group thought it was reasonable for successful outcomes to be attributable to the board, although the executive director completed the bulk of the work.

The perpetuation of a board of directors is a critical responsibility. Finding board members that are in alignment with the mission of the organization and have certain knowledge or skill that would benefit the board's governance role is not an easy assignment and may take a substantial amount of time to identify and recruit the best candidate. Although cultivating board prospects that possess certain qualities and characteristics may lead to more effective board member participation, only 56 percent of the board chairs accepted the expectation that recruiting board members should be a year-round activity, not just when a vacancy exists. When the executive

director assisted in the recruitment process, agreement with the expectation increased to 74 percent. A similar upward spike occurred with Expectation #1, when the executive director supported the board by writing and distributing board job descriptions outlining the board's roles and responsibilities. In another recruitment related responsibility (Expectation #8), 59 percent of the board chairs agreed that the board was in charge of informing board candidates about the organization's mission, goals, financial condition, and the amount of time and effort they would spend as volunteers. When this same task included help from their executive director, 78 percent of board chairs agreed with the expectation.

### **GENDER AND EXPECTATIONS**

Conflict among board members can be a thorny experience, especially if the issue is about terminating a board member or encouraging his or her resignation. Presented with this problem, the strength of agreement varied between female and male board chairs. Specifically, 74 percent of the male board chairs agreed that Expectation #11 was reasonable for removing board members who fail to meet the board's minimum expectations and to terminate the board member with help from their executive director. In contrast, only 43 percent of the female board chairs agreed with that scenario. Female board chairs were more reluctant to involve their executive director and were of the belief that this difficult task should rest with the board alone. In fact, when asked their opinion about board members being solely responsible for the removal of a board member, the agreement level among women board chairpersons increased to 78 percent.

Improving board performance through an annual evaluation is a recommended practice (Cornforth, 2001; Brown, 2007) and reflected in Expectation #15. Assessing the board's effectiveness can occur using various formats, such as an open discussion about the board's successes and failures, a written survey focused on the strengths and weaknesses of the board, or using checklists designed to identify gaps in board performance. Regardless of the approach used, when the evaluative process relied on the assistance of the executive director, 48 percent of female board chairs agreed with the expectation compared to 72 percent of the male board chairs. Board evaluation is not a highly desirable task, but female board chairs were more inclined (67 percent) to support an annual evaluation if conducted without any staff assistance.

Board chairpersons could indicate agreement levels with 12 expectations using the assistance of the executive director. As indicated by the analysis of variance results, gender differences were noted with agreement on expectations when assistance is provided. With all 12 expectations, women board chairs expressed less agreement than men do. Additionally, with eight out of those twelve expectations female board chairs agreed more strongly in the expectation than male board chairs did, if accomplished by board members alone. Male board chairs demonstrated a tendency to reduce the strength of their agreement when the executive director was not involved in helping the board members fulfill expectations. A representative example is Expectation #18. In this case, 93 percent of the male board chairs agreed that with help from their executive director, the board should define and evaluate the organization's mission, approve the budget, establish or adopt plans, ensure financial controls, and perpetuate the existence of the board. Their agreement

diminished by approximately 25 percent after eliminating the executive director's support.

Although the prevailing traditional view is that board members are responsible for writing and establishing policies, male board members demonstrated a discernible difference in their opinions with this responsibility. With the aid of the executive director, 83 percent of the male board chairs agreed to the expectation about establishing policies or job descriptions and ensuring its distribution to all board members. When the board was to act without the support of the executive director, the level of agreement plunged to 47 percent.

Almost all of the board literature takes the position that board members must engage in fundraising for their nonprofit organization (Tempel, Seiler, Aldrich, & Maehara, 2010; Mastracci & Herring, 2010). However, the requirement to fundraise can be a highly charged subject among board members (Perry, 2007). Among the male board chairs, 85 percent of them expressed agreement to participate in raising funds with the support of their executive director. When expected to fundraise by themselves, the male board chairs evidenced a noticeable decline in their support with 59 percent in agreement.

## DISCUSSION

Two findings from this study are especially intriguing. We unexpectedly discovered differences in how female and male board members think about board expectations and prefer to accomplish them. First, male board members are more apt to agree with the expectations when they can receive assistance from their executive directors. Second, women board chairs prefer to go it alone. In an attempt to interpret the reasons for the differences in how female and male board chairpersons approach their board role, we found the professional literature of little help. There is nonprofit literature reporting the significance of gender (Themudo, 2009; Mastracci & Herring, 2010), gender and volunteering (Taniguchi, 2006), gender discrimination in the nonprofit sector (Gibelman, 2000), gender stereotyping affecting advancement for women (Evans, 2011) employees in the nonprofit sector with women remaining disadvantaged as wage earners (Sampson & Moore, 2008). However, we could not find a satisfactory explanation for the differences in leadership behavior between female and male board chairs. Despite what seems to be a general belief that there are differences in the leadership styles of men and women, evidence is rather sparse (Champoux, 2000; Jonsen, Maznevski, & Schneider, 2010) with claims that similarities outweigh the differences (Robbins, 2003). Jonsen, Maznevski, & Schneider (2010) write that "the role of gender and leadership over the last 20 years remain largely inconsistent" (p. 550). One article that surfaced during our search (*The Economist*, 2003) offered an explanation as to why women board chairs are apt to reject help from either their female or male executive directors. The article suggests that women are less likely to form networks, thus leaving them to work alone.

Discussions with female colleagues generated some similar views on the matter. One explanation is that men have more experience working in teams and relying on team members for success. Another explanation rejected the stereotypical characterization of women leaders as

being more nurturing and willing to share power and information. Instead, a female colleague suggested that women might believe that their success is contingent on being competitive and guarded, thus the preference to work alone.

While we are in no position to draw a definitive conclusion about gender differences and leadership, overall our research findings do illuminate important patterns of agreement and disagreement among male and female organizational leaders.

Gender and position has some bearing on one's belief and agreement with how board members fulfill role expectations as delineated in the professional literature. Female board chairs favor traditionalist models of board governance. Traditionalist views (such as, Houle, 1997) and board models that reinforce hierarchical relationships (such as, Carver, 1997) have long permeated the nonprofit board literature. Female board chairs preferences to fulfill their responsibilities without the aid of the executive director is in line with Carver's Policy Governance Model. In fact, Carver places a heavy burden on board members to not waiver in their governance roles and responsibilities. He states,

*No matter how well the CEO tells the board what to do and when to do it, governance cannot be excellent under these conditions. Going through the motions, even the 'right' motions, is fake leadership that transforms a CEO into a baby-sitter. Only a deluded board waits for its CEO to make it a good board. (1997, p. 123).*

Houle's traditionalist tripartite model places the board chair in a dominant hierarchical position and distinguishes between the power lines of the executive director and board chairs. He states,

*Some executives are afraid of strong chairmen, fearing a focus of leadership competitive with their own. But, if boards are to be well organized and are to do their jobs properly, they need just such a focus. The executive must administer the institution. The chairman must guide, develop, and coordinate the work of the board. When either tries to carry out the other's responsibilities, trouble probably lies ahead (p. 13).*

In contrast, male board chairs prefer governance models that are collegial and team oriented (Leduc & Block, 1989; Jager & Rehli, 2012) or board-centered (Herman & Heimovics, 1991).

After exploring the many expectations of how board members should fulfill their roles and responsibilities, it is understandable that many board members look for help from the prescriptive board literature. The level of legal responsibility assumed by board members creates pressures to function properly, as captured by a statement made by Peter Drucker (1977, p. 8) more than three decades ago, "Whether it is being done right or not will determine largely whether the enterprise will survive and prosper or decline and ultimately fail." Looking to ease their burden, some board members migrate to cookbook formulas to guide the business of the board of directors.

Prescriptive advice can provide a framework for improving nonprofit organizational performance, but not all advice is good advice. More specifically, our concern is with the overload of standards about how board members should act; labeling board members as "failures" when they do not adhere to all of the expectations. Certainly, adherence to the 18

expectations will make a positive difference in the outcome of nonprofit organizations, but we do not support the viewpoint that the board should act alone in all governance matters. In our experience, nonprofit boards have demonstrated effective outcomes when board members and executive directors exercised more tolerance and understanding for the busy volunteer who could not fulfill some board tasks because of many life-related obligations. When the board does not have the ability to complete their work, they may find benefit in using the executive director to assist or work behind the scenes to help board members be successful (Block, 1998; Herman & Heimovics, 1991).

### CONCLUSION

In this study, we were able to examine the reaction of male and female board chairpersons to 18 expectations culled from the board literature. In answer to our four questions, some variability exists in the strength of certain expectations, but overall the board chairs tend to demonstrate consistency with their role expectations. There are similarities and differences between female and male board chairs. However, the divergence becomes recognizable in relation to their working relationship with their CEO. Given the results, it seems reasonable to speculate that the achievement of board projects and tasks would improve if assigned to men with the assistance of their executive director. Additionally, the findings imply that successful outcomes would occur more often if women board members carried out certain assignments by working independently, rather than working in committees or accepting offers of assistance from their executive director.

While the article helps fill the void of information about gender and the role of board chairpersons, the implications for these findings is still open to further interpretation and analysis. We could also benefit from learning more about role expectations and gender among other board member positions. For instance, we do not know whether board members holding other officer positions would respond differently than their board chair. Likewise, would role expectations differ among board members who are not officers? Additionally, future research should explore how board members become exposed to the role expectations. Do they learn what is expected of them by reading books and journal articles, attending conferences, observing other board members, board development training, advice from board consultants or from their executive director? Indeed, there is still more to learn about the relationships between gender, board roles and the activities that shape perceptions about board member performance.



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