



Four Tips from a First Time Board Chair

Stefan Lanfer, former board chair of [The Communications Network](#), shares his experience and top four tips to help encourage other first-time board chairs in their new role.

When I was first elected board chair, I felt so honored and humbled. I also felt intimidated. What if a crisis came on my watch? What if I missed warning signs that would be obvious to a more seasoned leader? How quickly would I find myself out of my depth?

Before my term began, I devoured BoardSource's excellent guide, [The Board Chair Handbook](#). For anyone new to the role, I can't imagine a better primer. My recommendation comes with one caveat, however: it can add to the feeling of being overwhelmed. As I made my way through the very practical exploration of a chair's

responsibilities and what effective governance requires, the magnitude of what lay ahead loomed large.

As it turned out, my term began as a hotel labor strike jeopardized our annual conference, which is our nonprofit's primary source of revenue. It ended in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced us to cancel the same event and gather virtually. Yet, when I passed the reins to my successor, our membership was engaged and growing. Our board had taken further steps in our ongoing evolution from a managing board of a shoestring operation to a strategic governing body of a growing and professionalizing enterprise. We were in a healthy financial position. My part in these favorable outcomes felt modest to me. Nonprofit governance is a team sport to be sure. Yet, when my term came to an end, my successor kindly asked for my advice.

Adding to my recommendation to make time for The Board Chair Handbook, here are four things I learned along the way that I wish I knew at the outset.

1. Be Yourself; Everyone Else is Already Taken

One of the things that made me so intimidated about becoming chair was the example of my predecessors, whom I held in such high regard. As I considered their strengths and styles as leaders, I found it difficult not to fixate on the aspects I judged to be perfectly aligned with my areas of weakness and insecurity. How could I possibly measure up? At some point, however, I decided to reject the rabbit hole of that self-sabotaging thinking. I recognized that my colleagues had elected me for my unique strengths, style, and potential contribution – and not for how well I might squeeze into another's mold.

As Oscar Wilde once counseled, “Be yourself; everyone else is taken.” I like pairing that with the insight from American journalist Jeff Jarvis to “Do what you do best, and link to the rest.” A board chair doesn't need to be excellent at everything. They do need to know themselves – their strengths and limits – to understand how they can lead best and when the best exercise of their leadership is to ask others for help and follow them.

For me, this insight was enormously reassuring and freeing. It gave me the confidence to be myself, to be creative, and to take risks with purpose – like welcoming 1,000 colleagues to our conference in a **red lycra bodysuit** or in song.

2. Pick and Stick to a Few Big Ideas

When I first looked behind the curtain at what a board chair's levers of change actually are, I was struck that they are relatively few, and, in the life of our nonprofit, my two-year term was not long at all. These realities put me in mind of a large and slow-to-course-correct cruise ship, where a captain spends most of their time away from the bridge and without their hands on the wheel. Instead, the captain is out and about, engaging crew and passengers, taking stock of the vessel, the elements, and changes in the context. And yet, a captain's contributions are critical. Their perspective and guidance help senior officers steer sure and true – clear of the icebergs and safely into port.

From the first moments of my term, this realization led me to identify and name a few big ideas I could focus on. In the first moments after I was elected, I shared these aloud with my fellow board members. I returned to them again and again throughout my term. In my interactions with our CEO and his team, with our executive committee, with the full board, with our supporters, and in my few communications to our full membership, these ideas were my orienting north star. They helped me judge where to focus my energies and, over time, to recognize how my contributions were influencing our course. I hope they also gave my leadership a sense of coherence.

The three big ideas I focused on were “next, network, and now.” By “next,” I meant to emphasize evolutionary over revolutionary change – that I saw us in a good place and on a positive trajectory that we ought to sustain. Our continued forward progress on the measures I noted above was of first importance to me. By “network,” I meant to emphasize the opportunity for us to create more opportunities for our members to be leaders – and to recognize the many ways (beyond board service alone) that we depended on our network to strengthen our organization and our field. My term coincided with our organization's 40th anniversary – which the CEO and I marked with a **message of thanks to our members** that centered on the idea we were a “network of leaders.” By “now,” I meant to affirm and encourage our opportunities to be a voice and model of leadership and relevance to the most urgent and important issues of our day. So, I was grateful and proud in the years that followed for us to be present, engaged, and spurring others to use their voice and take action related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and anti-racism, and for us not to be silent in the face of injustice.

3. Mind the Way, Not only the What

As chair, you are ultimately accountable for the decisions your board makes. Of course, you want every decision to be the best and most justifiable. Yet, equally or perhaps even more important than the ultimate decisions and how they stack up on the merits, a chair owns the process for arriving at each decision. It is exactly like the best marriage advice I have ever received – that it's better to arrive at the wrong decision together than the right one on your own. Without agreement, a board, like a married couple, doesn't own decisions together. Consequently, the wins are not as sweet, and the losses are worse because they are tainted by discord, resentment, and blame. Without agreement on processes and decisions, relationships suffer, and so does our capacity to respond well to challenges and opportunities.

During my term as chair, our board faced several complicated, weighty decisions. One of the things I would do differently if I had the opportunity to do it again is to be more consistently attentive to process. I would make sure from the outset that the board was in agreement about how we would make our decisions- what goals, values, priorities, and criteria we would use, and who needed to be involved, and when.

With a few of our big decisions, I operated instead from an assumption it was my primary responsibility (with help from my executive committee) to gather evidence, do the analysis, and present my recommendations to the full board for approval. I thought this would make for an efficient use of everyone's time. In reality, it made getting to closure much more difficult. Board members had to make sense not only of my analysis and recommendations, but of the process itself and whether they judged it to be adequate. This kept deliberations open and open-ended beyond when I felt we needed to get to closure. And it meant a few motions passing with more objections and abstentions than I would have preferred.

4. Make Room for the Real

They say change happens at the speed of trust, and this is certainly true for boards of directors. Especially when facing the hard stuff- the curveballs and crises, the bumpy processes, and the complex and consensus-defying decisions- a firm foundation of trust, respect, and mutual care are essential. It gives boards the fortitude, flexibility, creativity, and grace to hang in there with each other and for each other come what may.

This is why unstructured, agenda-free time together is so important. The drinks and dinner and night out on the town on the evening before the board meeting; the cultural, athletic, or educational activities you experience together in a new city where you've gathered to meet – we might think of such things as frivolous, or as fringe benefits of board service. In fact, they are foundational to board effectiveness. They create time and space for us to show up and be real, authentic, and honest with each other; to be ourselves, to let our guards down, to let our impressive credentials take a backseat, and simply to be with, see, value, and care for each other. In the process, we become more than professional colleagues engaged dispassionately in an intellectual exercise. We become trusted partners, and even friends, navigating the highs and lows and all of the meaning-making and rich collaboration that makes board service so very rewarding.

When COVID-19 limited us to virtual meetings, continuing to carve out space on our agendas for connection with each other was vital. Some people dread the icebreaker, I know. Yet, the right ones are investments that pay dividends. Some that we've used and found valuable are: writing and reading (a few at a time, scattered throughout a meeting) our own "I Am From" poems with [a template inspired by the poem "Where I'm From" by George Ella Lyon](#); bringing pictures of ourselves as teenagers and sharing the stories behind the photos; or, at a bare minimum, taking time for Brené Brown's "two-word check-in" exercise, where all participants share in just two words (with no commentary and no judgment) exactly how they are feeling.

Board time is precious. And one reliable bellwether of board chair effectiveness is how tightly they structure and facilitate meetings. So it's easy (and right) to ask if these activities are truly worthwhile. From my experience, it's easy (and right) to answer, "Yes, absolutely!"