

**The Importance of A Prenuptial Agreement Between
A Board President and the Executive Director
Or
Better Living Through Clear Expectations**

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There are a myriad of ways to describe the relationship between a board president and an executive director. Some say it's like a marriage. Others liken it to a foxhole in wartime. Still others see it as an adversarial relationship, much like that of rival gangs.

However you describe it, the relationship is what the participants make it to be. It can be one of mutual admiration and support, or it can be as fragile and tension filled as a Tennessee Williams play.

To be successful, this relationship must have two things in common: a respect for boundaries and a clear communication pathway for discussion. Without these, no relationship, personal or professional, can function successfully. In an organization, the agency will not function in a healthy manner, its mission will be lost and its employees, clients, board members and volunteers will be unhappy.

It is critical that the executive director and board president discuss, understand and accept role expectations, responsibilities and goals before any work is started. And it doesn't matter if they've been friends since kindergarten. Sometimes it's even more urgent when they've had a longstanding friendship.

Some years ago, when I assumed a board presidency, I sat down at a private dinner—away from phones, staff and family—with the executive director whom I'd known for years.

"What do you want from me?" we asked each other. In answer to his question I assured him he could make a one-minute phone call to me and then go on with his regular work. This was important because we were in the habit of having marathon conversations on business trips. Later on he asked me not to call him on Mondays unless it was urgent, because this was his planning and meeting day with his staff. I agreed. Now if I really need him on Monday, I tell his secretary and because he knows I respect this request, he always returns the call because he knows it's important. And all because we had our discussion.

For my side, I wanted to attend the quarterly board meetings and he set this up. We also discussed future meetings between the two of us, which kept in mind the other's schedules and needs.

Establishing how to communicate is also important. If there's a staff, should messages be left with them? Some people have answering machines or fax machines; others have beepers. Let each other know how you prefer to be contacted.

A person-to-person, time consuming meeting isn't always necessary in these days of easy electronic communication. But having a clear-cut agenda is. With one executive director, we wrote the agenda for the executive meeting on the first Friday of each month, and the agenda for the board meeting on the second Friday. It was an easy, painless way to keep informed and the business of the agency on target.

The role of each person in a meeting situation is an evolving process. There's nothing worse than sitting in a board meeting and wondering who called this meeting and why. Again, expectations such as an agenda or a briefing before a board meeting need to be established and discussed, along with the line of authority. Who takes over in the absence of the president, the executive director or the vice president? Decide in advance. This also avoids the issues of turf and boundary and saves hard feelings that can disrupt any board.

Perhaps the most difficult job of role recognition belongs to the board president. An agency needs different kinds of involvement at different times. When there's a capital campaign, a financial crisis, a period of intense growth or a redefinition of the agency's mission, a hands-on board president is needed. When things are going well with no major disruptions in sight, a more hands-off policy is needed. Executive directors and board presidents need to know what mode the agency is in.

I know a woman who has run a not-for-profit retail shop for 15 years. She says she'd love a board president who would stay out of her hair and let her continue doing the job that everyone says she does well. She doesn't want to be presented with a lot of schemes to make her more productive or to revamp a highly lucrative venture.

Fund raising is another potential source of trouble. For some reason, board members feel this is their cue to shift their emphasis to

programming and give the fund raising responsibilities to the hired gun. The reality is just the opposite and needs to be communicated to everyone. It's really the time to fine-tune fund raising so that all board contacts and efforts are as productive as possible. Again, with a strong president-executive partnership, this can be accomplished.

Another potential area for discontent comes when someone is hired to manage duties that were previously shared by staff or volunteers. Everyone feels threatened. Clear lines of authority have to be established and respected.

This is the time to hear people out and acknowledge their contributions so that nobody is hurt and the agency doesn't lose valuable resources. An example of this is a volunteer director of religious education, who did not want the position as paid staff, and stepped aside when a salaried director was hired. This did NOT mean that she wasn't interested in helping the new director. Unfortunately, the new director wasn't interested in her suggestions until a perceptive priest suggested that she have coffee once a month with the former director. He suggested she listen and use the ideas she felt comfortable with and credit the former director as often and publicly as possible. This sage advice helped avoid a difficult transition.

I once asked an executive director who had worked with many different board presidents who her favorite was, and why. She said it was a businessman who called every Friday for their weekly meeting. "He always asked me about my week," she says, "and this gave me a chance to ventilate." He'd then ask me, "Is this something you want me involved in, or can you handle it yourself?" Because of his respect for the executive director's boundaries and professional judgment, she had a mentor and partner and the president had a clear understanding of how the agency was functioning.

Privacy is another important aspect of the executive director/board president relationship. My husband gets up at 5:00 a.m., so a 6:00 a.m. call is not a problem for me. But a call after 9:00 p.m. is, and I make clear that unless it's an emergency, please wait until morning. In return, I never call an executive director at home or on the weekend unless there's marvelous news or a dire event. This includes vacation times. Staff and volunteers should be able to handle emergencies as well as routine agency functions. It also gives them a chance to show off their leadership abilities.

Define beforehand what an emergency is. I remember an executive director of a disease-

related foundation who left for a three-week summer vacation. He asked his staff to call him if anything happened to friends or a board member. But if the agency burned down, he knew they could handle it without him.

Social invitations are another area where personal space and distance should be respected. I entertain a lot and have often invited executive directors to parties, making clear that I do not mean to infringe on their free time. Social occasions should never be viewed as a command performance. Sometimes, there are personal reasons for refusing an invitation.

Once I extended an invitation to a man with whom I'd just started working. He refused and I told him that was fine. Later that day he called and thanked me for not putting him on the spot. He explained that he was a newly recovering alcoholic and was avoiding situations where alcohol would be served. He asked me to continue to invite him and that he'd come when he felt comfortable. Today we have a trusting and warm working relationship and friendship.

Is there anything more uncomfortable than sitting at a card table with a couple who is fighting? Or sitting in a restaurant in the middle of a family feud? Imagine conflict situations between an executive director and a board president. Nobody knows where to look, what to say or how to act. And everyone looks for the door.

Resolve these differences in private. These are times when issues of boundaries and communications are most important.

I've had constant disagreements and personality clashes with one executive director through the years. This relationship is based on warmth through friction. But we've kept out "dirty linen" private and made our differences work for us with the result that if we both feel comfortable with something, it's probably going to be comfortable for the entire board. Whatever we do together is better than what we do apart. When we do disagree in public, it is always over issues, rather than personalities.

Supporting one another is very important. Undermining each other is detrimental to everyone. Check out the facts first, before believing an accusation or criticism. Once, as a young social worker, I was told by a mother that her child's physician had told her to start saving for her child's funeral. I rushed into the doctor's office and asked him why he'd said this. Luckily, he was a kind man and asked me if, in all seriousness, I really thought he'd said this. What he'd really told the mother was that the outlook for her son wasn't good, but they'd do everything they could. The concern about funeral expenses

were the thoughts of a grief-stricken, shocked mother. When complaints or concerns come to you, stop and look into them before you react.

When misunderstandings occur, and they will, inform one another and decide who will handle them. After a frustrating day, some time ago, I jumped on a staff member's suggestions and hurt her feelings. A board member pointed it out to me and I told the executive director what I'd done. We discussed the possibility of me apologizing personally or of letting him handle the situation. He chose to handle it and, assuring the woman of the remorse I felt, was able to diffuse the situation. I have also resolved similar issues on his behalf with board members and contributors when feelings were hurt and noses put out of joint.

Not all conflicts can be resolved successfully and sometimes the board president, with the support of the board, has to terminate an executive director. A paper trail in these situations is very helpful.

Many years ago I worked with an executive who, among many other shortcomings, refused to learn the computer system and insisted on typing letters manually, and refused to use the computerized accounting system our CPA had recommended. We offered her a teacher and I offered to help her. She refused. I began to document our sessions outlined my expectations and shared the information with the executive committee. As it happened, she chose to leave before she was terminated, but our expectations of her behavior were clearly documented on paper. Without it, termination without litigation might have been impossible.

Every executive director that I have worked with has taught me something important,

whether I wanted him or her to or not. One taught me how miserable it is not to have one's phone calls returned, which makes one feel insignificant. Others have taught me to have broad shoulders and to give credit to those who deserve it.

The executives I've valued most have been patient, had a sense of humor and have been supportive. It's important that since I treasure these traits, I try to give them back to the people with whom I work. I've appreciated them for their clear sets of boundaries. I tend to be intrusive – and I need to know when I'm being a pain in the neck. I enjoyed those with whom I could have honest, confidential discussions about the strengths and challenges of our colleagues and how, between us, we could get the most out of them in terms of contributions to the agency's mission.

I've never been an executive director but the traits I've heard most often valued in a board president are respect for the director's intelligence and skills, a willingness to listen and be supportive, and the ability to help only when asked and then only as part of a team effort.

When I think of the great joys in my life, they include sitting down to work with a talented executive director to create ways to make the most out of what are always the limited resources of time and money for a not-for profit whose mission I value.

A clearly defined "prenuptial" agreement before starting out on this unique relationship adds to the chances of success for a cause that both parties cherish, and a fulfilling experience for all involved.

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