

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review

*Informing and inspiring leaders of social change*

## Leadership

# How to Be a Super Board Chair

Nine super tactics and one superpower board chairs can use to make the most of the board experience and prime their organizations for success.

By [Jon Huggett & Mark Zitter](#) | Aug. 24, 2020



Super board chairs don't just consider the near term; they make sure the institutions they serve endure shifts in leadership and deliver social impact that can cascade down the generations. (Illustration by iStock/tommy)

We both love to chair. Between us, we've chaired seven social enterprise boards. And while we can't claim to be super chairs, we've seen some. We've also learned a few important lessons for ourselves the hard way. We've chaired meetings as if we were doing our day job, collecting information to help make decisions but encouraging little other discussion. We've bored our boards rather than engage them. We've failed to leverage board members' time and wisdom in collective decision-making.

Over time, we came to appreciate that the stakes involved in chairing were high and the effects of our work were long-lasting. Good boards deliver "governance"; super boards go much further and build a legacy. They not only focus on creating change and helping the organization survive in the near term, but also work to ensure that the institution endures shifts in leadership and delivers social impact that can cascade down the generations.

The levers of power available to the chair are nuanced. Neither the executive director nor the board members report to the chair. The executive director reports to the board as a collective, and while board members may bring wisdom, legitimacy, diversity, political power, and resources, the system isn't set up to "manage" them—members don't receive bonuses and can't be fired easily.

Chairs also need a unique set of capabilities. We've also both been chief executives and found that chairing a board was not the same as running an organization. Some skills transferred. Some did not. **Chief executives need to be decisive.** Chairs lead a decision-making team. Effectively navigating these circumstances and becoming a super chair requires a range of tactics. Here are nine of our favorites:

## 1. Create a Culture for Good Collective Decision-Making

Daryl Messenger, former chair for **Union for Reform Judaism**, put it simply: "The chair leads by example and tone." Modeling norms of respect helps engage every member fully.

- Super chairs show respect for each member's time. Waiting for latecomers before starting a meeting punishes the punctual. Starting on time shows respect.
- Super chairs show respect for each member's views. They bring all members into discussions and from new members. This builds **psychological safety**, which enhances the board's collective intelligence, **especially if the board is diverse.**
- Super chairs respect each member's differences. **Experience has taught us** the value of making sure each member feels included, especially if they are part of a minority. Little things can make a big difference, whether scheduling meetings around different religious holidays, knowing the name of a member's same-sex partner, or calling out language that divides rather than unites.

## 2. Clarify Expectations

Super board chairs ensure that members share clear mutual expectations for roles and responsibilities. For example, Mark chaired an organization that expected board members to meet a specific "give or get" funding minimum, attend all board meetings, serve on two committees, and act as an ambassador for the organization. Super chairs make sure each member agrees to their responsibilities in writing.

It's equally important to share expectations related to boundaries. Some board members confuse governance with management. Unfortunately, we learned the importance of explicit boundaries by enduring rare-but-problematic behaviors of board directors we thought we knew better. Super chairs intervene when directors try to tell staff what to do, speak for the organization without authorization, or bypass the executive director to participate in services.

## 3. Create a Value Proposition for Each Member

Super chairs find out what drives each member and help make their experience satisfying—whether it’s helping a cause, building connections or skills, or recognition. In our own experience on the boards of **SFJAZZ** and **Khulisa, a criminal justice charity**, for example, our best memories include hearing great music and learning from men previously incarcerated, respectively. These opportunities were meaningful and helped us better understand how to support each organization.

Making new connections is common motivator. Jon has chaired three global boards and has made friends on six continents. Even just sharing contact information can help connect members, and social time **can make boards more effective**, as it builds trust. Members can also learn marketing, financial, and recruiting strategies from other members. Chairs can arrange training on topics like fundraising, for example, or if a member wants to learn about finance, put them on the finance committee. Finally, some members join for community recognition, and might appreciate the chance to host a fundraising event in their home or act as an ambassador to an important person. Super chairs make sure to praise these members for their generosity.

## 4. Run a Great Meeting

There are as **many ways to run a meeting** as there are to lead musical **performances**. Super board chairs craft the agenda collaboratively with the executive committee and executive director, and use precious board meeting time to discuss and decide, rather than report. Mark completely eliminated committee reports from meetings, moving them to one-page summaries in the board materials shared in advance. Aside from quick, formal votes when needed, discussions focused on major challenges. One success metric was the amount of time anyone other than the chair or executive director spent talking. Another was how many decisions the group made. In both cases, the more, the better. Meeting attendance and engagement soared, and directly applied members’ capabilities to solving important problems. Other tactics include:

- Starting and ending on time
- Serving refreshments 30 minutes ahead of time to encourage early arrival
- Setting an agenda with start times for each item, and sticking to it
- Using the “newspaper approach,” which attends to the most important agenda items first
- Moderating assertively enough to ensure that everyone gets airtime and gently enough so that everyone feels heard
- Finishing with a two-part, executive-only session—first asking everyone but the board and executive director to leave, then excusing the executive director

## 5. Make the Executive Director's Success Your Success

Super chairs know that the organization's and executive director's fortunes are intertwined. An executive director who is successful will lead the organization to success. And a successful organization is a great platform for a successful career for an executive director. The chair-executive director relationship will vary based on skills, experience, organizational needs, board dynamics, and who was in the role first.

Mark chaired a board with a mid-career executive director who hadn't finished college but wanted to. He went to the board to request funding for the remaining credits, which it granted. He also invited the executive director to attend relevant training sessions at his company, which benefited both the executive director and the nonprofit at no additional cost. An experienced chair can also be a valuable advisor to a new executive director. Jim Heeger, former board chair of **Moishe House**, told us he doubled as executive coach and strategic facilitator in that role.

Who starts first is another consideration. An existing chair can set the tone for the relationship through hiring, onboarding, and structuring the executive director's role in board meetings. If the executive director is the incumbent, the chair should discuss proposed role changes from the prior chair up front. Either way, both the chair and the executive director should work to design the relationship in a way that works well for the organization and sets up the executive director for maximum success.

## 6. Continually Update Succession Plans

Andrew Barnett, Chair of **Church Urban Fund**, told us plainly: "Succession planning is not something you do from time to time. You should always be ready. Things can get bad if either the chair or the executive director assume that they will be there indefinitely." Board chairs and executive directors are temporary stewards.

Super board chairs should ensure that the organization has two types of succession plans for the executive director: emergency and routine. Mark worked together with an executive director, for example, to identify board members, consultants, and former executive directors as good candidates for emergency succession, and contacted several in advance. Chairs should also ask the executive director periodically about their career plans, and either require cultivation of internal candidates or explore external options proactively—or both.

Boards need succession plans too, for chairs and all committees. The board typically draws the chair from current board membership, often selecting the vice chair. But the ability to lead a board is

paramount; experience on that board is secondary. Don't neglect the emergency plan: One of us recently saw a solid succession plan evaporate when the vice chair withdrew unexpectedly. The emergency backup plan should include several candidates, ideally with committee chair experience.

## 7. Demand Professional-Quality Recruiting

A 2017 study of nonprofit board recruitment reported: "Boards are no more diverse than they were two years ago, and current recruitment priorities indicate this is unlikely to change." Most nonprofit boards recruit new members by asking members and staff for ideas, thus limiting themselves to their networks. A better solution is to have the nominating committee create a process to identify, recruit, screen, and select new members, whether or not they are known to the organization. This broadens the candidate pool, allows the board to make good decisions quickly and easily, and helps candidates understand the value of joining and expectations.

The next step is to create a desired profile for new board members. We've never found everything we want in one person, but we suggest looking for these qualities:

- **Skills:** professional expertise or leadership experience on other boards
- **Usefulness:** time and willingness to do the work required
- **Power:** important connections and the influence to leverage them
- **Equity:** diversity of race, age, gender, and sexual orientation
- **Resources:** ability and willingness to generate financial benefit for the organization

The committee should then use **executive search techniques**, including LinkedIn **and the like** to identify candidates. Mark was chair of a board that brought on an executive recruiter with the explicit goal of professionalizing board recruitment. The recruiter led searches for the nonprofit with the same rigor and reach as they did in their day job. A buttoned-down process increases the chances of finding and attracting good candidates because it creates a first-class impression of the organization.

## 8. Pare Deadwood

Super board chairs recognize when members are flagging, and either reactivate them or work to move them off the board. Removing someone from the board is uncomfortable, and can be tricky, especially if they are well-connected or large donors. Term limits ensure that non-performance is not interminable, but they only help with members nearing the end of their terms.

Mark instituted annual board review calls, initially with the chair and later with governance committee. These involved members giving feedback on their experience and then self-evaluating against the written expectations they originally agreed to. Most board members were meeting the requirements and said so. Those who weren't uniformly either stated that they were falling short and decided to resign, or promised to meet all requirements going forward (and followed through).

## 9. Solicit Feedback

A [McKinsey study](#) found that only one in four board chairs asked for feedback on meetings, or regularly engaged in either group or individual evaluations. Super chairs go beyond informal conversations to seek regular, structured, candid input. One tactic is asking for feedback at the end of each meeting, verbally or in survey format. This shows respect for members' time and feeds quality improvement.

Another approach is fielding a more-detailed, annual board survey—ideally with the option to respond anonymously. As new chairs, we were reluctant to ask for feedback for fear of receiving unfavorable results. We did get some of that, and it hurt. But of course, it also allowed us to fix deficiencies we hadn't seen. Soliciting regular feedback demonstrates a commitment to making the board the best it can be and models accountability that should be expected of all directors.

Super board chairs aren't superhuman, but over time, they develop the superpower of leading as a peer, rather than a boss. In our own work as chairs, we strove to bring every brain into every meeting. We learned to talk less, listen more, and let the executive director shine.

As INSEAD Professor Stanislav Shekshnia [wrote](#), “Good chairs recognize that they are not first among equals. They are just the people responsible for making everyone on their boards a good director.”

The reward is your legacy. Super chairs can help make super boards, which sustain an institution from a founder through successors. They create approaches, policies, and a culture that multiplies the organization's impact, both in the near term and far into the future.

*Read more stories by [Mark Zitter](#) & [Jon Huggett](#).*



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