



The Complete Guide to the Roles of Nonprofit Board Chair and Executive Director



While both the **executive director and board chair** play important leadership roles, they have different responsibilities and areas of expertise. Learning how these roles divide the responsibilities for guiding and running your nonprofit ensures that your organization is well structured and that you remain in full compliance with all rules and regulations covering nonprofits.

In this ebook, we'll examine the similarities and differences between board chairs and executive directors, as well as discuss how defining these roles can set your board up for success.



Board Chair vs. Executive Director – What’s the Difference?

Your board, including your **board chair**, is an advisory group that makes important decisions and ensures your nonprofit follows all rules and governance guidelines. While the board is critical to a nonprofit’s success, it is not involved in daily management; instead, it makes broad decisions, guides initiatives, and monitors success and results. As the leader of the board, the chair’s primary goals are to help ensure success, to see the big picture, and to help your organization fulfill its mission.

An executive director is far more hands-on than a typical board member—even more so than the board chair. The executive director oversees operations of your nonprofit and is ultimately responsible for the day-to-day activities and initiatives the organization pursues. The executive director’s responsibilities include hiring and training staff, generating a marketing strategy, working toward goals, and fulfilling your mission.

The **board chair and the executive director** do share some responsibilities, and their work has a direct impact on your organization’s success. It is essential that these individuals work well together so that your nonprofit’s needs will be covered. Fully understanding and defining the responsibilities of the board chair and the executive director will empower them to do their best work, in addition to facilitating collaboration.





Board Chair and Executive Director Responsibilities

While every nonprofit is different, **board chairs and executive directors** perform similar roles for each organization. The topics we explore here are important to any nonprofit and detail the responsibilities for each of these critical performers.

Board Chair: The board chair and other members are in charge of planning, strategy, and ensuring the organization is **moving directly towards its goals and mission**. The board is not responsible for the day-to-day operations of the nonprofit or for the internal structure and staffing. Too much crossover and intervention from the board can result in confusion and even non-compliance with some key nonprofit requirements.

Executive Director: The day-to-day operations of a nonprofit are the direct responsibility of the executive director and their staff. Several **key responsibilities** include:

- Supervising and collaborating with staff
- Creating and administering strategic plans
- Planning and overseeing an annual budget
- Establishing and maintaining relationships with various organizations and utilizing those relationships to strategically enhance the mission
- Engaging in fundraising and developing other revenues
- Implementing marketing and other communication efforts



Planning, Long- and Short-Term

Board Chair: Your board chair is a valuable resource when it comes to strategic planning and can help put your brand on the right path for the future. It is important to note that board seats of all types have term limits, so some goals may not be achieved during the duration of this board member's tenure.

A board chair is responsible for high-level guidance as well as planning and support, but not the day-to-day operations. For most organizations, the board chair helps with strategic planning by detailing key performance goals designed to grow the brand—but does not act as a hands-on team member.

Executive Director: Both your executive director and board chair offer important input into long-term planning; the differences lie in the duration of service. Your executive director is an employee, and as such, they can hold their role indefinitely. A skilled, loyal director may run the operations of the nonprofit for years; this allows them to not only help with long-range planning, but to reach those goals, too.

Your executive director also focuses on setting short-term goals and relaying those goals to your staff.



A photograph of two men in business attire. On the left, a Black man is seen from the back, looking towards the right. On the right, a white man with a beard is seen in profile, looking towards the left. They appear to be in a professional conversation. The background is a blurred office setting with large windows.

Staff Hiring and Management

Board Chair: When it comes to actually hiring an executive director, the board chair is responsible for defining the role, evaluating candidates, and eventually hiring the person with whom they will work closely.

Executive Director: The executive director is responsible for hiring all mid- and lower-level staff and for recruiting and working with volunteers. The board and board chair are more likely to have input into the hiring of C-suite executives.

The board does interact with staffers during meetings if specific reports or details are needed; otherwise, the executive director works as a liaison between the board and the nonprofit staff.

Governance

Board Chair: According to the **National Council of Nonprofits**, your board and your board chair are fundamentally responsible for the big picture, including the governance of your organization. Governance for nonprofits includes financial oversight and monitoring progress toward specific goals.

Executive Director: Your Executive Director is obligated to follow board-generated guidelines, but is not directly responsible for the compliance of governance standards; this falls to the board.



Financial Responsibility

Board Chair: While all employees have a responsibility to **maintain accurate accounts** and to handle funds and assets properly, the overall fiduciary responsibility falls to your board and board chair. Sound and savvy financial leadership is particularly important for nonprofits, since there are specific requirements with which you must comply.

Executive Director: An executive director is involved with and aware of day-to-day and ongoing financial expenditures but is not legally responsible for the organization's finances.



Fundraising

Funds are needed for regular programs, special initiatives, and more. Both the **executive director** and the **board chair** have responsibilities when it comes to raising funds, but these responsibilities differ in several key ways:

Board Chair: A board chair sets the tone and the example for the entire board and is responsible for both high-level decision-making and participation in fundraising efforts. Some organizations also require financial support from board members, but this varies. A board chair should be able to draw on their own network and connections to help attract sponsors and donors for the organization and be willing to make calls or introductions to broaden donor outreach.

Executive Director: In contrast, an executive director will be responsible for the logistics and in-house efforts and manage both staff and volunteers as funds are raised. This key employee may also build strong connections within the community, representing the brand in the media and becoming the “face” of the organization for donor communication and fundraising efforts.



Recruitment

Board Chair: The board chair is responsible for properly staffing committees, **orienting new members**, and preparing them for their new responsibilities. The board will focus on fulfilling key roles and recruiting members who can help the organization grow and thrive under the supervision of the board chair.

Executive Director: Board members serve a specific term, so recruitment should be ongoing. While finding new members primarily falls to the existing board, the executive director may share insights or suggest individual members.

Evaluations

Board Chair: The board and board chair will evaluate the performance of the executive director and may also review performance evaluations from other key staffers. The board chair may coordinate assessments of the board itself, both collectively and with **individual board members**.

Executive Director: Evaluations of the board chair are not performed by staff or by the executive director; instead, they are conducted **by the board itself on an annual basis**. The executive director will perform reviews of their team members and report to the board as needed.



Board Meetings

Board Chair: Like all board members, the board chair is required to attend regular board meetings and to follow the outlined procedure that the organization has adopted for meetings. Participation is important; without dedicated attendance, the board simply will not be able to work effectively. The board chair not only attends meetings, **he or she also runs them**, listens to the counsel of other board members, and guides regulation compliance.

Executive Director: The executive director is often included in meetings and will **relay important details** about day-to-day operations, goals, challenges and more, but does not directly run board meetings. He or she simply participates as needed and when asked. In some cases, the executive director will be excluded from sessions and closed-door proceedings.

Defining the specific responsibilities of your board chair and executive director provides transparency and helps these key members of the organization do their jobs effectively and successfully.



About Boardable

Built by nonprofit leaders, for nonprofits. Boardable empowers you to work more effectively with your boards and committees. We know the frustration you feel (and the hours you lose) just from organizing a meeting via email, phone, and text. We've lived it. We're from the nonprofit world, too. After looking around for the right tool but not finding it, we decided to build it. Boardable is a software platform that centralizes all communication between you and your board. Find the best meeting times, securely store all of your documents, archive discussion threads and more—all in one place.

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