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# Board Builder

Edition 3, July 2017: The role of the chair



So how can you get everyone pulling in the same direction, without you having to bust a gut?

## The hot seat edition: Why being a perfect chair is for losers

By Chris Borthwick, thinker in residence, Our Community

A good not-for-profit board chair, if you consult the relevant literature, combines the leadership skills of Alexander the Great, the inspiration of Martin Luther King, and the self-sacrifice of St. Francis of Assisi.

This makes the average person – someone with the self-sacrifice of whoever used the last of the milk and didn't replace it – feel that the job's going to be beyond them. That's why so many people run a mile when board members come sniffing around, and that's why we end up with so many chairs who combine the self-sacrifice of Eddie Obeid, the inspiration of Mark Latham, and the leadership skills of Pooh Bear.

If chairing a board required transcendent virtues, we wouldn't have many boards.

As it is, we've got 600,000 across Australia, and all things considered they work surprisingly well.

The job of the chair/president includes:

- Running the meetings
- Riding herd on the board
- Keeping the organisation focused on its goals
- Representing the organisation to others.

A smoothly working board is best for the organisation and easiest for the chair. If you as chair are feeling overworked, underappreciated, frustrated or enraged, you're doing it wrong.

The whole point of having an organisation is to spread the load around and remove any need for a superhero. In this edition we tell you how. ➤

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## Delegate tasks

**The trap:** The division of labour in the average not-for-profit organisation is ambiguous and ill-defined. In practice, this means everybody is going to try to unload all their work onto your shoulders. The better you are, the more people think of you first. You're the one person in the organisation who's supposed to know what's going on in all areas – it's not far from there to making you do everything.

**The remedy:** Get in first. Place real responsibility on to the other officebearers. Don't forget the deputy chair, who usually gets a straightforward sinecure. Make them work for it – give them the job (with the secretary) of prepping for the meetings and chasing people up afterwards.

Assign firm responsibility for every item on the agenda to a named board member. If it's too much work for one person, set up a subcommittee. Anything you haven't assigned reverts back to you. Don't let this happen.

## Recruit people

**The trap:** If there's one trick not-for-profit board members learn very quickly, it's that if you stuff something up often enough and badly enough, people will eventually stop asking you to do it. If you allow this to happen, your delegating will unroll until all the jobs are back with you. To move people you have to be able to make meaningful threats, and as board members generally aren't paid, the only possible threat is to bounce them from the board. And you can't do that unless you have someone else ready and willing to step in.

**The remedy:** Keep a recruitment committee active, and keep feeding it candidates. This is the bit of 'being a public face for the organisation' that makes your life easier. It's work, but it's less work than soldiering on while putting up with deadheads and malcontents. Having backup keeps the board members on their toes and makes it easier to replace them if they still don't shape up. Recruit good board candidates, and then recruit ordinary members to vote them in at your AGM.

## Get it in writing

**The trap:** Nothing drains your drive and dedication to the mission faster than continually adjudicating petty pointless squabbles between board members on procedural issues. At best, you have to take a lot of decisions that should have been settled at a lower level: at worst, you're left with a legacy of bad feeling and people resenting your authority.



As Chris Borthwick says, "if you're feeling overworked ... you're doing it wrong".

**The remedy:** Get policies in place so that everything doesn't have to be litigated from first principles every time an argument comes up. As a first step, download the ICDA [Policy Bank](#) and pass it to a policy subcommittee to adapt to your own circumstances.

## Know your limitations

**The trap:** The chair can easily drift into the position of being the grownup in a group of adolescents. The board acknowledges your authority, and certainly won't put forward alternatives, but complains bitterly behind your back about everything you do and develops an attitude of passive-aggressive opposition. This is no fun; ask any parent.

**The remedy:** You're not chair because you're smarter than the others, or more leader-like, or more charismatic. You're chair because you had the numbers. As far as the law is concerned, the chair is just another board member, only with a pen to sign the minutes. So don't make it about you. People who voted for you once will vote for you twice: use that. Wherever possible, settle a dispute by a snap hands-up vote. Spread the responsibility.

As a corollary to this, if you consistently lose votes like that, you're probably not going to enjoy being chair very much. Step down. Know where your last straw is, and make sure everybody else knows too. That's your ultimate power, and waving it around will win you some important arguments – if you're not bluffing. ●