Constructing a Partnership
No matter their size or mission, nonprofit organizations need and deserve boards and staff that can openly discuss successes and challenges so that, together, they can help the organization be effective. That is the essence of a constructive partnership. A constructive partnership, in turn, is an essential element of a high-functioning board.

Creating a climate of openness, and the transparency that accompanies it, is critical to nonprofit organizational success, especially in an era marked by heightened accountability for performance and, in many cases, increased competition for resources. That climate depends on a shared agreement of the distinctive roles of the board and the chief executive and, by extension, staff. With a shared agreement, these players can take steps to create the “space” for constructive partnerships — by providing the right information at the right time, by promoting board cohesion and candor, and by creating the right meeting structure. By building on a mutual understanding of their respective roles, chief executives and boards can disprove the belief that “effective governance by the board of a nonprofit is a rare and unnatural act,” a phrase used by Barbara Taylor, Richard Chait, and Tom Holland in their Harvard Business Review article (see Resources).

Different roles for different organizations
All constructive partnerships require agreement on the complementary roles of board and staff. But the line distinguishing those roles may be drawn at very different places for different types of organizations.

For example, a small startup nonprofit organization with a part-time or single staff member needs board members who straddle both sides of the board–staff line, not only working on governance and strategy but also taking on more operational duties, like accounting, stuffing envelopes for a fundraising mailing, or securing publicity for an event.

At the other end of the continuum, a large nonprofit with many full-time staff would likely draw the line at a different place, with board members focusing more on governance, strategy, and performance assessment, leaving staff to use their professional expertise to manage the day-to-day operations and implement the approved program initiatives.

Exactly where the line is drawn between board and staff responsibilities will depend on what the organization most needs at its particular stage of development. But wherever it is drawn, the important thing is that the roles and responsibilities of board and staff are clearly discussed and agreed upon. Once this foundation is in place, we’ve learned that maintaining and enhancing a constructive partnership requires attention to three key areas.

1. Filling the information gap
The first and perhaps most important component of constructive partnerships is bridging the inevitable information gap that occurs between staff who live and breathe the organization every day and board members who come together sporadically for a relatively brief time. To effectively fill that gap, nonprofit staff need to provide information that goes beyond reporting on past events and permits the board to contribute to future decision making in a timely manner. Getting this balance right is a process of constant adjustment. Too much information and board members may feel overwhelmed, even irritated; they may see only trees and miss the forest. Too little information and board members may feel that they can’t see the road they’re on or whether it is even leading to the forest.

In either case, candor is critical to creating a climate characterized by ongoing commitment to understand and analyze why things went well or poorly so that the organization can keep improving. A candid framing by staff of the situation can provide internal clarity about the relevant issues and make it easier for board members to find an entry point into the decision-making process. At the Wallace Foundation, such candid conversations about the strengths and weaknesses of various strategies have resulted not only in better strategies developed with board input but also greater board engagement and investment in our work as a whole.

And don't underestimate the importance of communicating with board members between meetings. Periodic updates on progress and
plans, or requests for advice, keep the board connected to the organization’s work between meetings.

2. **Building board cohesion**
Because candor is difficult to achieve and sustain without a climate of mutual respect, time invested in helping the board come together as a team pays big dividends. It is important to provide time for board members to get to know one another and to have shared experiences. Like many organizations, Wallace schedules board dinners the night before a board meeting, often inviting an outside speaker whose contributions are relevant to the next day’s discussion. We often include senior staff, many of whom regularly present to the board.

Providing opportunities for the board to discuss issues privately is also an important way to build board cohesion and to reinforce the expectation that all board members are active participants at meetings, not just passive recipients of staff reports. Because staff members generally shape the meeting agenda, it’s important for board members to “own” some meeting time that is theirs alone. At Wallace, the board meets in executive session at the beginning and end of every board meeting, once with the chief executive and once without. These sessions provide predictable space and time for board members to ask questions or raise concerns about particular issues that may need attention. The results of these discussions often help shape future meeting agendas. In addition, the board annually discusses its own performance, including whether there has been adequate candor and active participation in board discussions.

3. **Creating the right meeting structure**
The third component of constructive partnerships is ensuring board meetings focus on what is most important to the organization’s success so that board time is productive and the contributions of board members are maximized. At the Wallace Foundation, our board’s most important contribution is guidance on key strategic and performance issues — including the broad program areas in which we invest, the specific goals and strategies to be used in each area, the timing and duration of our initiatives, and our progress in meeting our mission (see Sidebar).

We plan our meeting agendas to allow ample time for strategic and performance issues. At our January meeting, we review the progress of the past year and plans for the coming year. We have developed an annual State of the Foundation Report that functions as an internal scorecard for this purpose. For each of the three other meetings, we do a “deep dive” into one of our three focus areas, reviewing original goals and strategies, results to date, lessons learned, and options for moving forward. The background materials prepared for these discussions are sent at least a week in advance to ensure board members have time to reflect on the issues to be discussed.

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**TEN TWELVE PRINCIPLES OF GOVERNANCE THAT POWER EXCEPTIONAL BOARDS**

1. **Constructive Partnership**
2. Mission Driven
3. Strategic Thinking
4. Culture of Inquiry
5. Independent-Mindedness
6. Ethos of Transparency
7. Compliance with Integrity
8. Sustaining Resources
9. Results-Oriented
10. Intentional Board Practices
11. Continuous Learning
12. Revitalization

At the meeting itself, staff presentations are limited to general framing comments, and most of the time is spent in conversation with the board, answering questions raised and listening to various perspectives expressed on the issues presented.

It’s important to note that we developed this approach in consultation with our board as a result of candid conversation in executive session. We all agreed we needed to provide more time for thinking ahead and reflection — something we observed was difficult when meetings were organized solely around specific recommendations for action. Now, we seek to create “space” for discussions with the board around the strategies that will ultimately drive the recommendations, while still allocating shorter blocks of time for other updates, reviewing financial performance, and voting on specific grants.

Why bother?
Building a constructive partnership between board and staff is not easy (and perhaps not common). From the chief executive’s perspective, it takes time to develop the trust that candor requires, and it takes courage to admit to a room full of smart board members that things don’t always turn out as planned or that mistakes have been made. From the board’s perspective, it takes dedication and commitment to faithfully attend board meetings and to adequately review board materials in advance. And it requires a real investment of time and effort for board members to understand the issues facing an organization so they can help develop the right strategies and performance measures to ensure success.

But the benefits of creating a constructive partnership are well worth the effort. Board members who feel they are active contributors to the organization’s success are more engaged and supportive. They are able to more effectively represent the organization to various outside groups, which often results in greater visibility and support for the organization’s work. Recruitment becomes easier because new board candidates are attracted to the energy and enthusiasm displayed by current members. From the staff’s perspective, the organization’s work is strengthened through the counsel of board members. And there is real satisfaction and confidence in knowing that the strategies being implemented have the full understanding and endorsement of the board. And, most importantly, the organization benefits by making full use of the contributions of both board and staff — however the lines are drawn between the two.

In other words, the actions of both board and staff, in partnership, “construct” a more effective organization. And that, in turn, benefits the people across the country whose opportunities for education, enrichment, health, and overall quality of life depend in important part on the vigor and effectiveness of the nonprofit sector.

RESOURCES:
