Building the Board Chairperson–CEO Relationship

George and Gracie. Martin and Lewis. John and Abigail Adams. Great two person teams are sometimes long-lasting, other times short-lived, but in their prime, they function seamlessly, and each brings out the other's strengths.

Similarly, the relationship between the board chair and the CEO can result in great team leadership—or it can lead to friction, misalignment, and loss of valuable board or executive talent if one of them departs in frustration. Building an effective relationship can't be reduced to one formula, but we have found these practices to be useful:

1. Choose a board chair with the "right stuff." Board chairs can literally make or break the effectiveness of the entire board, and thus the entire organization. Board chairs need leadership skills, communication skills, the courage to take a stand, and the respect of peers and the CEO. Great chairs are accessible, approachable, and patient with organizational process. An effective board chair needs the skills to play a variety of roles:
   - **Role model:** displaying integrity, trustworthiness, participation, and commitment to the mission
   - **Change agent:** engaging the board in visionary thinking and establishing a culture of free exchange and creativity
   - **Facilitator:** keeping meetings moving and ensuring that committees and management fulfill their assignments and keep the board up to date
   - **Confidant and sounding board for the CEO:** providing a safe zone for frank discussion, with nothing perceived as "taboo" or off limits
   - **Politician:** connecting with and being sensitive to the needs and opinions of key stakeholders
2. Develop a position description that describes the responsibilities and desired attributes of a chairperson.
3. Establish appropriate term limits for the chairperson. Generally, board chairs should serve at least two years and in most cases no more than five years.
4. Adopt an explicit board policy on succession planning for the chairperson and other board leaders. Assign the responsibility to a nominating or governance committee. The committee develops a "pipeline" of potential future board and committee chairpersons, and encourages their development.
5. Choose a chair-elect at least a year before the current chair's final term is expected to expire. The chair-elect can prepare to assume the office, for example, through briefing sessions with the CEO and attending committee meetings and educational conferences. The chair-elect and CEO should clarify how their relationship will work and agree on what's important, how often to communicate, and how to set meeting agendas.
6. Nurture the chair–CEO relationship. Keep communication lines open and candid, with "no surprises." Some chairs and CEOs routinely speak weekly or several times a month—more often if hot issues arise.
7. Nurture the chair–board relationship. Chairs foster open communication with board members in various ways. Some make it a point to have lunch with every member at least once or twice a year.
8. Evaluate both the board chairperson and the CEO—and include as one element of each evaluation an assessment of the board–CEO relationship.

Above all, both the board chair and CEO should put "we" above "me" and work together in the best interests of good governance and the organization. A sense of humor and a dose of humility won't hurt either.

Edward A. Kazemek is the chairman and CEO of **ACCORD** LIMITED, Chicago, Illinois. Barry S. Bader is President of Bader & Associates, Potomac, Maryland. As two of The Governance Institute's "Governance Advisors," Ed and Barry, along with Roger Witalis, president of **WITALIS** & Company, are available to assist members with on-site governance education programs and consultative projects.