What Makes an Effective Chamber Board

A guide for chamber directors

Strong chambers are led by strong boards, and strong boards don't happen by accident. They are built through a deliberate process: they carefully recruit, select, orient, educate and evaluate their members, and they keep every conversation anchored to the mission.

WHAT THE BOARD IS RESPONSIBLE FOR

- **Sets the direction.** Determines the mission, vision and values, and leads strategic planning.
- **Employs one person.** Hires, supports and evaluates the President/CEO, then delegates authority to manage the chamber and lead staff.
- **Ensures resources.** Adopts the annual budget, monitors finances and makes sure proper financial controls are in place.
- **Monitors performance.** Tracks progress toward strategic goals and asks, "How will we know we're successful?"
- **Takes responsibility for itself.** Recruits, orients and evaluates its own members and plans for leadership succession.

Every director also carries three legal duties: **Care** (be diligent and prudent), **Loyalty** (put the chamber's interests ahead of personal ones) and **Obedience** (follow the law, the bylaws and the mission).

THE BOARD GOVERNS; THE STAFF MANAGES

The Board Chair and President/CEO work as a team, not as employer and employee. Clear roles build mutual trust.

The board focuses on…	The staff focuses on…
What the chamber should achieve (ends)	How the work gets done (means)
Policy	Procedures that carry out policy
Strategic goals and priorities	Programs, events and daily operations
"Did we get the results we intended?"	"Are we heading in the right direction?"

Once a decision is made, the board speaks with **one clear voice**. Directors keep their right to disagree in the room, then support the majority decision outside it.

HABITS OF HIGH-PERFORMING BOARDS

- **They come prepared.** Directors read materials in advance, so a consent agenda can move routine reports and free time for real discussion.
- **They think strategically.** Meetings follow the strategic plan and focus on decisions, not a recap of last month's activity.
- **They tie every program to a goal.** "Because we always have" isn't a reason. Programs that no longer serve the mission are improved or retired.
- **They build a healthy culture.** Discussion is thoughtful, informed, courteous and candid. New ideas and new people are respected.
- **They treat staff as partners.** Staff are trusted advisors, and the board trusts the CEO to lead operations.
- **They measure what matters.** Every proposal answers, "How will we measure success?"

BUILDING A GREAT BOARD, YEAR AFTER YEAR

1. **Recruit with a board matrix.** Compare your board to your membership by industry, business size, geography, age, background and skills. Look for diversity of thought, not "fit."
2. **Put expectations in writing.** Share time, attendance, financial and engagement expectations with candidates before they're nominated. Have directors sign a commitment, code of conduct and conflict-of-interest statement every year.
3. **Orient every year.** Hold an annual orientation for the full board, plus individual sessions for new directors. Cover the mission, strategic plan, finances, bylaws, policies and roles.
4. **Keep developing.** Treat orientation as ongoing, with a short governance or learning segment built into regular meetings.
5. **Evaluate the board.** Use an annual self-assessment to celebrate what's working and agree on what to strengthen.
6. **Plan for succession.** Identify and mentor future leaders, including young professionals, well before they're needed.

QUICK SELF-CHECK FOR DIRECTORS

- ☐ Can I state our mission and our top strategic goals?
- ☐ Do I read the board packet before every meeting?
- ☐ Do I know how to read our financial statements?
- ☐ Do I act as a goodwill ambassador for the chamber?
- ☐ Do I keep my "chamber hat" separate from my business interests?
- ☐ Am I living up to the commitment I signed?