
THE ROLE OF THE BOARD

The role of the board of directors of any nonprofit is easily summarized: the board's role is to make the strategic decisions that can create an exemplary nonprofit organization.

Through their strategic decisions, or indecisions, a board of directors will ultimately determine the effectiveness and success of any organization. The board's choices can also result in an organization that merely exists and falls short of serving any meaningful public interest.

The description above presents the ideal role of a board. But the board of directors of a nonprofit organization can be differently described: a circle of well-intentioned volunteers who want to help a charity run programs and activities that help people or a cause; a corporately structured group of high-powered leaders focused on solving a societal problem or enhancing the quality of life in a community through the arts, education, healthcare, or preservation; a support group to a dynamic executive director focused on an exciting idea; the local leaders of a house of worship, soup kitchen, scouting program, or chapter of the community's Red Cross who want to keep the organization going and give back to their community.

America's 1.5 million charities receiving tax exemption by federal, state, and local governments are given considerable latitude for their governance structures. Regardless of the board's structure, men and women who serve on a board of directors share inescapable responsibilities:

- Legal fiduciaries—the board of directors literally owns the corporation; directors are legally responsible for the fiscal oversight and management of the corporation's programs, activities, services, and every action taken on behalf of the corporation.
- Public interest—directors function as representatives for the public's interest; all tax-exempt organizations must serve a public interest and benefit to receive the advantages of tax exemption (and, in some instances, tax deductibility).

Impact of Governance Leadership

“Organizations run out of leadership long before they run out of money” remains a sage warning for charities. Too often, the dedicated voluntary governance leaders of charities mistakenly believe that “more money” is the solution to their charities’ challenges. Although money is always welcomed and helpful, best-in-class charities achieve that standing primarily by attracting and retaining committed members of the board who feel passionately about the cause. Financial resources flow to organizations with great leaders who are focused on great mission-centered ideas.

Board members who want to make a real difference:

- Focus the organization on policies to reach the potential of the mission.
- Exercise their fiduciary responsibilities at all times and accept ownership for the organization.
- Make annual generous financial contributions and target their board time and financial investments to a select number of charities where they have deep passion for the mission and can make a significant investment over a sustained period of time.
- Bring the skills of being strategic thinkers and decision makers to the charity’s governance to assist the board in making strategic choices that will ultimately distinguish the organization from others of its type.
- Introduce the organization to other leaders who share an interest in the mission and may become financial investors or governance leaders.
- Ensure that the CEO is a full partner focused on the organization’s management. Are supportive, but independent, of the CEO.
- Understand the “business” of the organization and insist on a realistic business plan and realistic number crunching to support that plan. Ask the question, “Would I do this in my own business?” Work toward the goal of saying, “I would buy stock in the charity if it were a for-profit company!”
- Ensure there is a vision (a long-term plan for the organization) that is viable and being addressed by the board at all times. Develop a financial plan that supports that vision.

The board's role is critical, and it will ultimately be the board's strategic choices and decisions—or indecisions—that determine if a charity will be a meaningful contributor to the cause in which it is engaged.

ACTIONS FOR YOUR BOARD TO CONSIDER:

- Review your organization's job description for board members based on the sample provided on the next page to ensure that the board's roles are centered in governance rather than management.
- Review the past few board agendas. Do they reflect the key governance roles of being fiduciaries, planning for the future, and engaging the board in mission-centered initiatives? Do the agendas reflect *strategic* business?
- Review the nominating committee information provided against your board's process for identifying, nominating, and orienting new board members. Is the organization recruiting new leaders who have passion for the mission and are committed to creating a vision for the future that is viable and sustainable?

A Sample Board Member's Job Description for Any Nonprofit

- Understand and support the mission, programs, and services of the organization.
- Accept the responsibilities of being a fiduciary of a corporation that exists for the public good using tax-exempt, tax-deductible funds.
- Make a multiyear commitment to participate actively in governance meetings and programs.
- Be among the first, most generous, and consistent annual donors.
- Invite new people to become involved in the organization's work and to financially contribute.
- Assist other governance leaders in building relationships that will help the organization fulfill its mission.
- Be a steward of the public trust and a trustee of the organization's mission and resources.
- Keep the board's work focused on governance issues, policy creation, and setting strategic directions for the organization's future in a transparent and ethical manner.
- Keep the board focused on effectiveness in fulfilling the mission and programs and creating an organization that is best-in-class.
- As a fiduciary, ensure that the organization is diversely funded, approve the annual budget and monitor fiscal affairs, conduct an audit annually, have fiscal controls in place, review IRS Form 990, and plan for the financial future of the corporation.
- Ensure the board has policies in place regarding board and staff conflicts of interest, self-dealing, and transparency.
- Understand how the organization raises its funds, and approve of all fund-raising practices and external contracts for fund-raising.
- Leave management matters to the organization's CEO, and help the board and staff continuously differentiate the roles of governance and management.
- Be an advocate and ally for the CEO, assuming such support is merited. Participate in the hiring, nurturing, and evaluation of the CEO.
- Keep the board focused on the organization's mission.

Nominating Committee Roles

The nominating, or governance, committee of the board of directors is the most important committee of the organization as it is tasked with identifying, recruiting, orienting, nurturing, and evaluating the organization's governance leaders. If successful in meeting its mandate, the nominating committee's tasks include:

Identifying new leaders for the board.

- Constantly looking for—and being open to—new people who might serve on the board.
- Meeting formally and/or informally throughout the year with potential board members to ascertain their interest in the organization's mission and programs.
- Taking a “snapshot” of the governance leaders and determining the skills and talents that are not currently represented on the board. Identifying leaders who can fill those voids.
- Ensuring that there is a clear job description available for potential board members, as well as background materials, to help a potential board member be well briefed regarding the organization's mission, programs, finances, and governance structure.

Recommending new board members.

- Bringing forward qualified candidates to serve on the board who have indicated that they understand and have a personal or professional interest in the mission and programs; are willing to be generous financial donors; will make the time to attend board meetings and organizational events; are open to bringing new supporters into the life of the organization; understand their fiduciary responsibilities; and are comfortable with and accepting of the expectations of governance service.
- After a person has agreed to serve on the board and been elected: assigning a person to call the new board member prior to and after his or her first few meetings to ensure that the new member is receiving appropriate orientation and introduction to other board members, and to be available to answer questions regarding the organization.

Evaluating existing board members prior to renomination. The nominating committee should ask the following questions prior to asking a person to serve another term:

- Has this board member regularly attended board meetings and organizational activities?
- Does this person seem to be genuinely interested and engaged in the organization's mission and programs?
- Is this person a generous financial contributor?
- How has this board member made a difference in the organization and board?
- Has this board member engaged other people in the organization financially or in other ways?
- Has this person opened doors for us?
- Should there be a conversation with this person prior to renomination to ascertain how this person might want to become more or differently involved in the organization?
- Does this person model and advance our mission?

Identifying governance leadership within the board. The nominating committee is the appropriate body to propose a slate of officers, asking:

- Which leaders can work most effectively in motivating other board members?
- Can prospective leaders effectively work with the staff leader and support and encourage that person without losing independence and perspective?
- Do the officers model the mission to appropriate constituents and have the respect of the community?
- Are the officers clear regarding the role of governance contrasted to day-to-day management? Do they help keep governance and staff roles distinct?
- Do the officers model and exceed the requirements of board service through the giving of their time, contacts, and financial resources?
- Do the officers demonstrate openness to new people and ideas while safekeeping the mission and programs from straying?
- Are the officers inclusive of others at meetings, or do they show excessive "ownership" of the organization?
- Do the officers demonstrate a commitment to the organization's future? Are they leading the board in actively planning for that future?

Questions to Ask Yourself BEFORE You Join a Board

- What is the mission of this organization?
- What does this organization actually do?
- Are the mission and programs of interest to me and people I know?
- Do I feel a personal connection to the mission and programs?
- Can I see myself getting excited about serving on this board and getting other people interested?
- Am I willing to make a generous financial commitment annually as a board member?
- Have I read the latest audit and current financial statement of this organization?
- Am I prepared to be a fiduciary and accept the consequences of that role?
- What do people I know and respect think about this organization?
- Does the community really need this nonprofit and is it filling a perceived need?
- Does this nonprofit do what it does better than similar groups?
- Have I met the board leaders and chief staff officer of this organization, and do they seem enthusiastic about its future?
- Has anyone told me why they want me to serve on this board?
- Do I think of this as an “obligation” or something I’d actually like to do?
- Have I been told what the expectations are for board members, and am I comfortable with them?
- Am I prepared to ask other people to give money, and their time, to this group?
- Why am I doing this?

Questions to Ask Yourself BEFORE You Agree to Another Term on a Board

- Do I still feel a sense of passion for the mission and programs of this organization?
- Am I still prepared to ask others to give money, time, and expertise to this group?
- Why do they want me to serve another term?
- Have I enjoyed participating in the board meetings and getting to know the board?
- Does the board understand their roles, and is the board actually governing and leading the organization?
- Do I feel my money, and money invested by others, is being well spent in addressing our mission?
- Is the best role for me to be in governance, or am I really just interested in giving money and being an occasional participant in the programs?
- Can I articulate why this organization merits tax exemption (and possibly public dollars through government contracts for services)?
- What are the challenges of this nonprofit in the coming years of my service on this board?
- Have my family and friends shown interest in this group during my first term?
- Would I miss not being a part of this organization's leadership if I stepped down?
- Am I ready to give more of my money and more of my time?
- Deep down, do I think this group is effective at what we say we do?
- Are we doing something that no one else is doing, or doing it in a different way that is really making a difference for the community and the cause we are serving?
- Do I still feel good about the staff leader, and does that person have a real vision for the future of this organization?
- Am I proud of this group's mission and work, and am I proud of my role in the organization?
- Do I think I'm making a solid investment of my time and money by being in a leadership role of this group?
- How have I made a difference serving on this board?
- Why am I doing this?

What Are the Characteristics of an Engaged Board?

An engaged board of directors:

- Unanimously supports and embraces the mission.
- Can speak in detail about what the organization actually does.
- Is focused on the future of the organization and attaining higher levels of achievement and effectiveness.
- Provides supervision and guidance to the CEO and sets the organization's policies but leaves management to the CEO.
- Never turns its back to the challenges of the organization; board members see themselves as the "owners" of the charity.
- Values different perspectives around the board table regarding how to govern the organization, but is united in supporting the core programs and services that address the mission.
- Enthusiastically recruits new board members to broaden the organization's supporters.
- Holds all board members accountable for meeting the stated expectations of board service, recognizing that each governance leader has varying capacities to give time and resources.
- Understands and exercises its fiduciary roles; board members are the organization's most dependable and generous donors.
- Enjoys attending board meetings; attendance is always high.
- Constantly introduces the organization to new people.

An engaged board is focused on providing the leadership, financial and human resources, and vision to achieve what the nonprofit was created to address. Serving on an engaged board of directors is a rewarding experience, and you know you are making a solid investment of your time and money.

Engagement is not defined by "being busy" and "doing things." Too many boards are very busy and tasked with all sorts of activities not tied to governance roles. That is not the type of engagement I am advocating. My definition of engagement involves board members developing a sense of ownership in the mission and work of the organization. The ownership is based on a personal or professional stake in the challenges of ensuring that the mission of the organization is accomplished. It is the leap from wanting to do "good works" to accepting the organization's mission as part of one's own sense of accomplishment and achieving success.

Keeping Your Board Engaged

Engage your board by:

1. Focusing on the board's unique roles of governance and stewardship of the mission.
2. Creating a sense of board ownership of the organization by being clear that the board owns the tax-exempt organization on behalf of the public and that the board is the only decision-making body.
3. Using sound corporate principles through the gifts and talents of your board members' for-profit experiences to build "the best of the best" nonprofits in your field.
4. Providing oversight and guidance to the CEO but remaining independent from the CEO.
5. Ensuring that the board's business agendas are policy-centered, mission-adherent, and concerned with financial and fund development oversight; this involves preparing for the future, meeting legal and fiduciary requirements, but not program management.
6. Including time at each meeting to be briefed by staff on current organizational programs, activities, and services, or by outside experts on trends in your field.
7. Allowing time at meetings for governance-related questions and input.
8. Building in time after meetings for socializing, getting to know other board members, creating a shared passion for the mission.

Horatio Alger's Experience at Engaging the Board

The Horatio Alger Association's Board of Directors is an engaged group of high-level national and international leaders. We invite successful leaders to serve on the board, and we are clear that we have high expectations during their service for their time, financial investment, and personal engagement. We want leaders who will make the organization one of their top philanthropic activities. We are rarely disappointed!

Because we have a large national board, we also count on a deeply committed executive committee and a modest number of committees. Committees have clear responsibilities and meet when needed but never for perfunctory reasons. We focus on governance, being good fiduciaries, giving and raising lots of money, planning for the organization's future, and learning as much as possible about the programs and services we provide. We also spend time with the young people we fund with college scholarships, and we have seen how our efforts are changing lives and future generations of Americans.

The Board and the CEO

Ken Dayton, longtime CEO of Dayton Hudson and a leading voice in philanthropy, once wrote in an often-cited speech titled “Governance Is Governance”: “The most important relationship in a nonprofit organization is between the chair and the CEO.” When the chair and the CEO are a team, the potential for effectiveness is significantly enhanced. Some nonprofits suffer from a constant “grudge match” regarding “who is in charge.” Such challenges are the result of a lack of clarity regarding the roles of the board contrasted to the CEO. However, mutual respect built on an appreciation of each other’s roles and responsibilities is the cornerstone of an effective chair and CEO team.

Two key reasons people give for supporting a charity are a mission that speaks to their souls and leaders capable of fulfilling the mission. The board and the CEO are the ultimate leaders that make that possible.

As previously noted, one of the board’s most important roles is the hiring, nurturing, retention, and evaluation of the organization’s CEO. Although a CEO is often a voting member of the board, in most organizations the CEO is the only person directly hired and supervised by the board.

Attributes a Board Should Seek and Nurture in the CEO

Attributes of an effective nonprofit CEO include the following:

- Being a person of vision, yet grounded in managing the organization.
- Being a “chief motivation officer” for the board, staff, and external communities and giving credit to others generously.
- Being gifted in managing staff members and volunteers.
- Building a shared commitment to the mission and programs.
- Being comfortable continually using the word *strategic* with the board and keeping the organization focused on strategic actions and planning.
- Having a vision with a plan rooted in excitement and reality and knowing how to share that vision with the board and key constituencies so that the vision is mutually owned.
- Focusing on building the capacity of the organization to meet the future needs and challenges.
- Hiring a staff that complements and supplements the CEO’s skills.
- Exhibiting an understanding of Stephen Covey’s distinction between what is urgent and what is important.
- Being a steward of the organization’s mission, programs, and services and being the strongest champion of the mission.
- Balancing passion for the cause with securing and managing the finances required to support the mission.
- Constantly providing the board with data and environmental trends to inform the organization’s plans for the future.

Working with the Board

Exemplary CEOs devote up to 50 percent of their time to working with the board individually and as a group. They understand the “care and nurturing” required to identify the most effective ways to engage the board as a group and individually for strategic purposes. Although a board peer, the most effective CEOs have a service-leader mindset that is continually focused on measurable results.

To be successful a CEO needs the board to give—in writing and in action—the CEO both the responsibility and the authority to lead and manage the organization. While the board members are the fiduciaries and responsible for the corporation, the CEO is charged with managing the staff, programs, services, and operations.

As a board member and employee, the CEO must be able to balance both roles and be comfortable moving simultaneously within those roles. This requires superb communication skills, the ability to develop relationships with the board built on integrity and trust, at times allowing for brutal honesty regarding the organization’s challenges.

Wise CEOs realize that their successes are the result of the success of the board and larger organization; they are generous in providing recognition to others. Some CEOs face the challenge of separating their personality and persona from the public image of the charity. Exemplary organizations that want to stand the test of time are built on exceptional missions by exceptional leaders, but those leaders—board and staff—should never overpower the organization’s *raison d’être*. All nonprofit leaders are temporary stewards of the public trust. The test of any charity’s mission, program, and long-term strength is its ability to withstand changes of the board and staff leadership. The majority of nonprofit organizations that fail, even with powerful missions, do so because of their reliance on personality-driven leadership.

Considering the rapidly changing nonprofit environment of the past decade, a major economic downturn, and an unclear future regarding the relationship of governmental relationships with the nonprofit community on funding and tax issues, perhaps the most overlooked attribute of a great CEO is the ability to act quickly, make effective adjustments, and adapt to change while maintaining the integrity of the mission. Nonprofit organizations are rarely as nimble as for-profit corporations, but CEOs who can master this trait will help to create best-in-class results.

Ways the Board Can Effectively Partner with a CEO

Although boards should always have a level of independence from the CEO, that does not diminish the importance of developing and maintaining an effective partnership. The board can support the CEO in a number of important ways: being easily accessible on a timely basis; ensuring that the CEO is fairly compensated; never referring to the CEO as “the hired hand”; and encouraging the CEO to participate in executive education leadership opportunities within the corporate and nonprofit sectors.

The greatest gift a board can provide the CEO is honest ongoing dialogue that permits the CEO to discuss the organization’s challenges and opportunities without fear that such a conversation indicates weakness on the part of the CEO. Many CEOs lack “strategic-thinking partners” and would benefit from the experiences of peers who have mutual concerns for advancing the charity’s mission and vision.

ACTIONS FOR YOUR BOARD TO CONSIDER:

- Review the position description and annual evaluation process for the CEO to ensure the position’s focus is on managing the organization and engaging with the board to envision the future.
- Encourage board members to engage in private and public dialogue with the CEO as a sounding board for the organization’s challenges and opportunities.

BEFORE YOU SAY “I DO”

The conversation usually goes like this: “You need to join the board. It’s not a lot of work, very few meetings, the staff does all the work and there are some good people on the board you should meet.” You start receiving meeting notices and find yourself serving on the board of a charity. Congratulations, maybe.

Before you say “I do” to joining any charity’s legal governing board, you need to step back, ask a series of questions, do some research, and learn about the organization. The most important question is “what is motivating me to serve on *this* board?” Do you understand the mission and work they do? If you don’t have a personal passion for the mission, do yourself and the organization a favor and channel your energies elsewhere.

Assuming you understand and embrace the mission, decide if you are willing to fulfill the five reasons people are asked to join a charity board:

1. Your money
2. Your contacts
3. Expertise you can contribute to the organization
4. More of your money
5. More of your contacts

If you can’t fulfill all five criteria, you are not ready to say “I do.”

How do people you know and trust feel about this organization, if they know about it? Is the organization serving an important role in the community, does it have a unique niche, or is it hard to distinguish from other organizations that do something similar? Could you explain what it does in a 30-second elevator ride with a colleague? You are going to be asked to give your own money, and get more from others, so you need to be able to easily talk about its mission and work. Do you know and respect the members of the board? Is serving on the board the right role for you, or do you want to start by doing some volunteer work?

So far, you are still interested. Good. Your community's nonprofits need strong leaders, and most cities need a broader set of leaders as too many boards overlap. Therefore, adding new voices with new ideas and new relationships would be great for your community's charities.

Time for your homework. Before you say "I do" you need to have a one-on-one meeting with the CEO and determine if the leader has "the vision thing" for the organization. If the CEO doesn't, no one else will. This person needs to show some strong leadership attributes. Ask for copies of the last two audited financial statements, the last three sets of board minutes (how is board attendance and do the issues discussed in the minutes interest you?), and a copy of their IRS form 990 (the equivalent to a tax return). Do they have Directors and Officers Liability Insurance?

Read and study everything. Through the 990 and audit, you can get a handle on the organization's finances, the salaries they pay, how much is being spent on administration versus programs, and determine if the organization is fiscally healthy. Have they been running deficits, and do they have an endowment? Is the CEO someone that you feel very comfortable in supporting, and introducing to your friends? Are you ready to financially invest in this person's vision? Other than money and contacts, how can you help this organization?

There are numerous ways to "check out" the charity via unbiased sources. You can review the charity with the Better Business Bureau's "Wise Giving Alliance" by visiting Give.org, or review the rating of Charitynavigator.org or GuideStar.org.

Congratulations for completing your due diligence. You won't regret it. Now go back to the beginning and re-ask yourself, "Why am I doing this?" Hopefully, you now have a solid set of reasons, and this could be the start of a wonderful and fulfilling long-term relationship.

WHO DOES WHAT? THE NONPROFIT BOARD AND CEO

Conventional wisdom is that nonprofit organizations fail because they run out of money. However, my experience is that long before nonprofits run out of money, they run out of leadership.

A SUCCESSFUL CHARITY MUST HAVE:

- A mission that is compelling, and an approach to fulfilling that mission that is understandable and easily embraced by others
- A board of trustees that is passionate, committed to the mission, and willing to invest time, talent, treasure, and trust
- A CEO with vision, yet grounded in managing an organization, and able to motivate a board, staff, and donors.

Stacks of money can not overcome the absence of any of these foundations in sustaining and building an effective charity. Money and mission aside, the downfall of many nonprofits occurs when there is confusion or conflict regarding the roles of the board and the CEO.

The most effective organizational structure is where the board governs, and the CEO manages. Unfortunately, trustees often find it easier to tell the CEO how to manage the organization, and the CEO prefers to set policy rather than execute it. The central roles of trusteeship are governance and holding the CEO accountable for policy implementation and good management. Among the most important tasks any board undertakes are hiring, nurturing, and annually evaluating the CEO. Too many boards only act as a “support group” to the CEO. Yet, board members are the legal owners and fiduciaries of the nonprofit corporation. Yes, they need to be supportive of the CEO, but their roles are very different.

Finger pointing and the blame game occur when there are not clearly written expectations for board members and the CEO. Too few nonprofits provide their board members with a written job description and expectations, but they should. Just as the CEO should have written goals, objectives, and an annual evaluation, the board's nominating committee should be assessing the commitment of each trustee before re-electing them to another term. (Good governance practices suggest directors should serve no more than two consecutive three-year terms prior to rotating off the board for at least a year.)

Smart and effective CEOs commit significant time to the "care and feeding of the board," acknowledge and recognize the multiple forms of the board's contributions, and understand the value that good trusteeship brings to the organization. Excellent charities are not referred to as "Joe's organization" or "Sally's group." The best CEOs do not attempt to make it "my organization" as they understand they are temporary stewards of the organization's mission and work. Such self-aggrandizement blurs the mission, makes it tough on successors, and nullifies the important role of the board, donors, volunteers, and staff. CEOs who are serious about creating an effective organization build the support of others and recognize the value of their board and donors, rather than focusing on seeing themselves in the society pages. A charity is supposed to be about its mission and the people it serves, not its leader.

In turn, effective boards fairly compensate the CEO, never refer to him or her as "our hired hand," and recognize accomplishments and leadership skills. Smart boards also make certain that CEOs, especially long-standing leaders, are in a constant learning mode by sending them to advanced corporate or nonprofit leadership training or professional development opportunities. Unfortunately, in tough times, the first budget item that boards cut is staff training which might be the most important investment they can make.

The board must also initiate an honest dialogue that permits the CEO to discuss the challenges and opportunities of the organization without fear that such a conversation indicates "weakness" on the CEO's part. Every CEO would benefit enormously from such honest conversations, but is terrified of the possible ramifications.

Effectiveness of any charity will ultimately depend on the leadership skills and commitment of the board and CEO. Developing that relationship is worth investing time and trust. Don't let your favorite charities run out of leadership before they run out of money.

NONPROFIT CEOS: ABILITY TO WALK ON WATER HIGHLY DESIRABLE

The media regularly showcases corporate CEOs who are closely identified with their companies. We don't know very much about the people who lead charities and nonprofit organizations. What are the attributes of the ideal nonprofit CEO? When searching for a new CEO, smart nonprofit boards include "ability to walk on water highly desirable" in their advertisements.

Stellar nonprofit CEOs have "vision with a plan," contrasted to fantastic ideas that are unattainable. The "vision thing" truly distinguishes leaders, but only when that leader can bring committed board members, staff, and volunteers into the organization, share that vision, and let everyone "own" a piece of the actualized vision.

Great CEOs see themselves as the temporary stewards of the organization's mission, programs, and services. They do not own the mission or the organization, rather they see it is a position of public trust. They daily champion the mission as central to every action of the organization.

The best CEOs are focused on building the capacity for an organization to meet future needs. Capacity is built by hiring staff that complement – and supplement – the CEO's skills. They nurture and support their staff, and confidently delegate work so that staff will learn, grow, and excel in their jobs. Capacity is further realized by deeply engaging volunteers through board service that sets the policy direction of the organization, and volunteers who become invested in program delivery.

A great CEO has an ego capable of giving credit to others and sharing broadly in the visibility of the staff and volunteers to the community and media. Example: if a CEO has any role in creating a photograph for the organization, they are never in the center of the photo as they understand that there is always someone – a board member, staff person, volunteer, donor, or client – who is far more important and more in need of being central in that photo. Checked egos encourage collaboration with other organizations which saves money and increases overall capacity.

Among key attributes of the nation's best charity CEOs:

- Great leaders understand Stephen Covey's difference between what is urgent and what is important.
- Beyond vision, effective CEOs focus their own role on strategic decision-making. Without an emphasis on "strategic," CEOs simply spin, and spin.
- The ability to speak and write passionately about the mission and work of the organization. The CEO is often "the face" of the organization to the community, but understands that role is for the advancement of the programs, not self promotion. There is a delicate balance between being known as the best advocate for your cause, and making sure it is about the cause, not the CEO.
- Effective CEOs model professional and personal behavior in their interactions with boards, staff, volunteers, and donors. They inspire others to bring out their very best gifts and talents for the organization.
- They are not shy to ask for help of others, including financial, to insure success of programmatic initiatives.
- Good CEOs are able to balance passion for the cause with securing and managing the finances required to support that cause.

The most overlooked trait of a great CEO is the ability to be nimble. Nimbleness is about being able to quickly and effectively adjust and adapt, with integrity to the mission, to our constantly changing environment.

There are two equally essential factors in deciding whether to financially support a charity or to work for it as a volunteer or staff person: a charity must have a mission that speaks to your soul, and a leader capable of making it happen. One without the other is not enough. As you consider supporting charities that can make a difference in your community, look for organizations that have great missions that resonate with you, and leaders that have the gifts and talents to realize your appropriately high expectations. It is all about leadership. Tall orders, even for those who can walk on water.