

Defining the role of the president

There is little shared understanding of the role of president. It is one of the least defined roles in all types of organisations whether charity, professional organisation or membership body.

The role depends on history, culture, size etc. and the uniqueness of each organization. The roles of a president are variously described as ambassador, enabler, fixer, sound counsellor, mediator, leader and fundraiser. Presidents are appointed to bring their reputation, significant profile, address book and experience to the organisation. And sometimes it seems it is simply their turn!

In today's world charities struggle to balance the sometimes conflicting demands that require a board to be both professional and competent, as well as democratically representative with active stakeholder engagement. It is in the challenges of representation and stakeholder engagement that a president can play a particularly valuable role.

Distinguishing the skills of a president from those of the chair is key, although in many professional bodies the president is also the chair of trustees. Fundamentally, the chair has the leadership role in ensuring that the trustees collectively fulfill their duties and responsibilities; whereas a president, freed from this legal role can:

- **champion the beneficiary and capture the views of external stakeholders.**
In my experience there are a number of presidents that implicitly understand this role. Many external stakeholders would like to see greater collaboration at a strategic level between charities serving the same group of beneficiaries. Someone above the potentially vested interest could offer critical challenge when there is merit in greater co-operation: occasions where the president can focus on external perception and reputation in the interests of the greater good.
- **guard long term impact**
Similarly, an independent president can perform an important service to the organisation in helping it to focus on the impact of its work to beneficiaries and to the outside world in the longer term as a balance to short-termism or chasing money with strings attached.
- **mediate**
When there is significant discontent there is value in someone not accountable for governance becoming involved as an impartial go-between – a respected mediator. A president can play an essential role when the members of a charity are at loggerheads with the management and board of the charity. And often presidents can help heal difficult relationship between chair and chief executive (CEO).
- **Statesman/woman**

With their links with external stakeholders and their ability to stand aside from day to day issues, a president can bring independent oversight to activities that may impinge on organisational reputation. For example, there may be vested interests in trustee appointments so ensuring that a competent board exists with open and transparent processes becomes more vital if representatives of beneficiaries do not sit on boards.

These functions begin to describe the considerable skills needed for the president's role. A successful president is probably outgoing, well connected, has good 'radar' and has the charisma and authority to step in when needed. Although not a trustee, a president may be encouraged to attend trustee meetings from time to time to know what is going on, but their impartiality is certainly heightened if they are not voting members of the board. Presidents may also usefully chair the AGM, advisory groups and similar stakeholder meetings.

Most important is that the president understands his or her role and does not encroach upon the role of chair and CEO. I suspect it may become increasingly difficult to find people with all these qualities but it is important that we do.

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