

## More On The Nonprofit Board-Staff Dance

06.09.22 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



One of the most important predictors of success or failure of a nonprofit organization is how well the directors and executive staff choreograph their subtle but complicated partnership. [\*The Delicate Dance of the Nonprofit Board and Staff\*](#) (February 25, 2022).

Generally, the board of a nonprofit has “[ultimate direction](#) and control” of the “activities and affairs.” It “may delegate” some or all of the management duties, but only if it retains that ultimate authority.

Each board-staff duo must develop a special rhythm of harmonious collaboration. But there are few “clear guidelines on a workable dividing line between the board’s oversight responsibilities and the executive’s delegated management duties. This [gray area](#) is a breeding ground for power struggles.”

Our February 25th introductory post on this critical governance issue included selected articles and blog posts explaining the basic rules and offering general advice about avoiding common stumbling blocks.

For a deeper dive, the nonprofit sector is lucky enough to have access to the experience and wise counsel of the governance experts at BoardSource. This 501(c)(3) with a distinguished board of directors and an advisory research council of eminent scholars in the nonprofit field has a special dedicated website section devoted exclusively to [The Board-Staff Partnership](#).

### ***BoardSource Offerings***

Together with “its global network of leaders” that “represent a broad and diverse cross-section of the social sector,” BoardSource is “committed to providing support that is relevant and accessible to organizations of every size, stage, geography, and programmatic focus.”

A large chunk of information is published as a collection of thirteen “[Key Topics in Nonprofit Board Service](#).” The offerings there include “resources and tools on a wide range of board leadership topics that can help you educate yourself and your board, navigate thorny board issues, and address new challenges or opportunities your board may be facing.

Each of the 13 major topic sections includes a directory of downloadable resources, articles, and publications.”

First on this list of thirteen board-governance issues is “[The Board-Staff Partnership](#).” “A strong and healthy board partnership provides flexible and resilient leadership that contributes positively to the organization’s overall impact. A weak or dysfunctional partnership” does the opposite, impeding “the effectiveness of both the board and the executive,...” It also “puts the organization at risk in a number of ways – lack of strategic alignment or direction, executive turnover, a toxic organizational culture; the list could go on and on.”

BoardSource touts its own use of these lessons and techniques to successfully guide the organizational relationship between its board of directors and top executive staff.

### ***The Board-Staff Partnership***

The purpose of the dedicated website section on [The Board-Staff Partnership](#) is to “provide guidance on how to develop and maintain meaningful and results-oriented board chair–executive, board–executive, and board–staff partnerships, as well as how to navigate thorny issues such as micromanagement.”

There are “Guides, Tools, Templates, and Infographics.” Among them, for example, is a 7-page, downloadable publication: [Board-Staff Interaction: What’s Acceptable, What’s Not? You Ask, We Answer](#). “Without realizing it, many nonprofits put their boards on an imaginary pedestal, which leaves many employees – especially new employees – unsure about how to approach board members. This compilation of FAQs helps explain the intricacies (and the benefits) of the board–staff partnership.”

Another entry is the one-page [Tips for Developing a Mission Statement](#). “A strong mission statement is vital for nonprofit organizations ....This resource provides ideas not only for drafting your mission statement, but also for ensuring your board and staff are consistently referring back to the mission statement.”

A related resource is a publication in the BoardSource Bookstore: [The Nonprofit Board’s Role in Mission, Planning, and Evaluation \(2008\)](#). With 110 pages, PDF or print, at the 101 level of proficiency, this publication costs \$29.

A third example in this Board-Staff Partnership category is: [Trouble at the Top: The Nonprofit Board’s Guide to Managing an Imperfect Chief Executive \(2009\)](#) In PDF, with 73 pages, it is a “201-level” offering costing \$26. “While the relationship is often smooth, your board must be prepared to take action if problems with your chief executive arise”....There is “practical advice for handling complex situations by leading you through an in-depth analysis of 22 case studies.”

### ***Board Support Program***

BoardSource operates an impressive [Board Support Program](#) that “provides year-round governance guidance, resources, and leadership development to you, your board, and your organization.”

It’s offered on a revenue-based sliding scale, ranging from \$500 a year for organizations with less than \$250,000 in annual revenue, up to the top rate of \$3,250 a year for organizations who receive over \$10-million.

The pricing is determined so that it’s “affordable and accessible to the vast majority of nonprofits.” A lower-cost alternative than the Board Support Program, with some but not all benefits, is the [membership program for nonprofit leaders](#), at \$129 annually.

The benefits start with a [Board Self-Assessment \(BSA\)](#). Armed with insights from that self-assessment, an organization can access “members-only” additional services and benefits including:

- [BoardSource Exchange](#): Connect, engage, and share questions and insights with members around the world.
- [Certificate of Nonprofit Board Education](#): Take a four-module, on-demand educational course (with certification on completion) on the “fundamental nonprofit governance concepts every nonprofit leader should understand, including board structure and practices, the roles and responsibilities of board members, and financial and legal oversight.”
- [Ask-an-Expert](#): Send a question or issue by email and receive governance guidance from a BoardSource expert.
- [Problem Solvers](#): Get help with the diagnosis of board challenges, including via a self-guided pathway.
- [Resources + Solutions \(R&S\) emails](#): Access all content including instantly downloadable tools and infographics and the full collection of “101-, 201-, and 301-level [topic papers](#).”
- [Additional Benefits](#): Enjoy member pricing on 40+ publications; a collection of assessment tools; and training programs.

### ***Conclusion***

This board-staff delicate dance is an issue that affects many of the nonprofits in the United States except the smallest ones with no paid staff at all. But the BoardSource website includes coverage of a much broader range of governance topics that apply to all organizations.

It’s certainly well worth the time to take a look and see what’s on offer.

– Linda J. Rosenthal, J.D., FPLG Information & Research Director