



# INSIGHT SERVICE EXPERTISE

## Creating an Effective CEO-Board Chair Leadership Dyad in Community Health Centers

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*Community Health Centers (CHCs) are navigating some of the most significant industry changes in “Value for Money” and “Population Health” financing under federal health policy initiatives contained in the Accountable Care Act.*

### Changes Call for Effective Partnerships

CHCs, as well as hospitals and health systems, are confronted with an uncertain future. The stakes have never been higher to operate successfully under value-based payment criteria and establish change in the design of the care model needed for managing the health of vulnerable patient populations. As the role of CHCs in the overall health care delivery system is examined and strengthened, the need for high performing governing boards has never been

more important. A strong, accountable partnership between the CEO and Board Chair is a key enabler to board effectiveness and organizational success. The strength of the professional relationship between the CEO and Board is linked with a center’s ability to perform optimally, thereby generating maximum community health benefit. We see that in CHCs, this dyad needs to promote and engage in dialogue about how to best develop, nurture and sustain their relationship. In fact, this intentional relationship building is important strategic work essential to organizational effectiveness.

Board Chairs and CEOs need to partner in new ways to inspire others as they navigate the changes ahead. The Board and CEO dyad form a partnership to lead the CHC. The Board focuses on oversight and policy setting, and delegates to the CEO responsibility for managing the operations and resources. When this relationship is strong and healthy, the CHC will flourish. The effective dyad also helps the organization weather downturns and surprises. When this relationship is weak or dysfunctional, organizational success is at stake. The capacity to collaborate in creating and sustaining an environment in which there is trust, mutual respect, effective dialogue, commitment, accountability for the sake of meeting the mission, vision, and goals lead to high performance.

## Culture Matters

When the board's culture fosters strong collaboration among fellow board members and between the Board Chair and CEO, the CHC has a stronger competitive advantage to meet community health needs. Culture can be defined as the norms, values and beliefs held by groups and the way they function within that context;

said simply it's "how we do things around here". It conveys a sense of identity to staff, management and board members. Culture provides unwritten and sometimes unspoken guidelines in how to get along in the organization.

## High performing CHC boards intentionally foster a culture with five characteristics:

1. focus on achieving the organization's mission
2. building trust and candor
3. encouraging open, respectful dissent
4. requiring individual accountability
5. pursuing continuous improvement

When there is role clarity and a relationship grounded in collaboration between these volunteer and professional partners, the Board and staff experience coherent leadership that enables everyone to make their optimum contribution.

## Attributes of Dyad Cooperation

The CEO and Chair leadership dyad shapes the

agenda, style, and quality of deliberations of the CHC board. When there is an effective partnership, the following outcomes are likely to occur.

1. Planning results in meaningful agendas and effective board interactions;
2. Well-run meetings enable true value-added board participation;
3. Opportunities emerge to reinforce board member passion for the CHC and a sense of collegiality among board members.

Effective dyads also yields board members who are highly interested and engaged, have a clear focus on well-defined governance priorities, exhibit high-attendance and enthusiasm at meetings, engage in powerful questioning, dialogue and deliberation, offer constructive dissent and welcome debate. Low-functioning boards can be characterized as having members who are passive and reactive, have unclear priorities, spotty attendance with low energy, spending much of their time listening with little discourse, and suppressing challenges and disagreements.

## Board Chair Development

Sometimes CHC Board Chairs are appointed to their leadership role without a clear understanding of the job they are supposed to perform and without receiving any real development about their roles, responsibilities, expectations and accountabilities. Most of us aren't born knowing how to facilitate good meetings and how to cultivate positive engagement among a group of volunteers! The dyad partnership can only help.

## Avoiding Obstacles to Success

In my experience, I've noticed many CEO-Chair partners start their relationship with minimal planning and few ground rules to guide their work going forward. As a result, what's left unsaid or unplanned can lead to unmet expectations, anger and frustration. CEO-Chair partners can clash over countless things; often it is a conflict about boundaries of roles and responsibilities and where power is shared. When conflicts aren't successfully resolved, we can revert to illusions of control and start blaming the other person. Unresolved tension and protracted conflict between the CEO and

Chair is a leading cause of CEO turnover.

Although there are circumstances for which this turnover is warranted, often it reflects a preventable failure in the CEO-Chair partnership.

Other board members and staff observe this behavior and take their cues accordingly leading to dysfunctional and ineffective interactions.

Conversely, when the CEO and Chair have intentional conversations about mutual expectations leading to clear and compelling agreements, the messages sent to the rest of the organization will inspire high performance.

Talking about expectations and making agreements avoids pitfalls and accelerates achievement of shared goals. In addition, when these partners give purposeful attention to relationship building they are more accepting of and adaptable with each other. After making these agreements, it's important to periodically check in with each other and provide feedback on whether agreements are being kept or whether they need fine-tuning.

## What Can You Do?

As you think about your current CEO-Chair relationship, reflect on these questions:

- How would you characterize the CEO-Chair leadership dyad and their relationship today? Is it changing? What are the implications?
- What does a culture of trust, respect, collaboration & transparency look like? Is there evidence that culture exists? If not, why not?
- What agreements do you need moving forward to ensure a strong, accountable partnership?
- What systems or structures do you need in place to ensure your success?

When the CEO and Chair are intentional in creating their relationship they will more likely foster a partnership based on trust, mutual respect, tailored communication, role clarity and a bias towards accountability. Towards this end, establishing clear “collaboration agreements” setting forth mutual expectations provides a foundation for a positive working relationship grounded in trust and transparency. It increases the likelihood that the partners get their expectations met. In addition, it proactively creates a process for restoring trust when an agreement has been broken. For example – Susan, CEO, and Carlos, Board Chair, both care

about role modeling productive dialogue and healthy debate in the boardroom. They made an agreement to ask open-ended questions to seek understanding when they don't share the same perspective of their partner. They might say, "From my vantage point, I see or experience something different" or "Tell me more about that situation or experience. Maybe I'm missing something?"

## Getting Started

So, how do you get started in creating an effective CEO-Chair partnership? Set aside time to consider the following questions. Use them to prompt conversation. Be deliberate in listening to each other and recording your agreements. Since so much is at stake with the CEO-Chair leadership dyad, you may want to plan several conversations to allow time for a thorough and meaningful dialogue. Saying, "We'll just have each other's backs" is not enough. Some have found it to be valuable to have an executive coach to help facilitate this process. The coach guides the CEO and Chair through a structured dialogue to define and establish their partnership needs and expectations. Additional check-in meetings quarterly are recommended to assess the

effectiveness of the partnership. This practice can be replicated when either partner completes their tenure and a new partner emerges. Typically, the CEO is the one who experiences working with multiple Chairs. Below are some questions to stimulate this conversation. The questions are categorized into purpose, roles, communication, connection, and style. Use them to get you started and add your own as you talk with one another.

### PURPOSE:

- Why do you spend your time and talent to ensure that our CHC fulfills its mission and vision?
- What legacy do you want to leave? How do you want our CHC to be a better place as a result of your leadership and involvement?
- What are our shared goals in this relationship? How can we take the Board and organization to the "next level"?
- What outcomes are we looking to achieve? How will we measure our success?

- What expertise and capabilities do we each bring to the table that will help us in achieving our shared purpose?

## ROLES:

- What are the roles and responsibilities of the CEO? Where will the CEO take the lead?
- What are the roles and responsibilities of the Board Chair? Where will the Board Chair take the lead?
- For what situations, do you expect to be consulted and/or informed?
- What can we expect from one another in working together?
- How will we continue to grow in our roles?
- What commitments will we make to each other to ensure success in our respective roles?

## COMMUNICATION & PROCESS:

- How often will we meet (frequency and duration)?
- How should our communication be structured (telephone, face to face or

e-mail) to identify agendas and prepare for our meetings together?

- How far in advance should we discuss the agenda for our upcoming meetings?
- How will we give and receive feedback about our relationship?
- How will we hold each other accountable for following the agreements we establish?
- When we are in meetings, what are our respective roles and responsibilities –with the Board and staff?

## CONNECTION:

- How do you prefer to be contacted (phone, email, text)? How quickly do you typically respond?
- What is the best time of day for us to connect?
- How often would you like to speak? Should we set up weekly calls? A monthly lunch? On an as needed basis? Both?

## OTHER IMPORTANT

## QUESTIONS:

- What are the most important things you need to know about me?

- What do you need to know about my leadership style that would be helpful?
- When you consider our current relationship, what do you think will help us build and sustain an effective partnership?
- What one conversation, if we had it, could have the potential to significantly improve our working relationship?

Pressures to meet goals to improve quality, decrease cost, improve service and ensure access to care are increasing. A strong, accountable partnership between the CEO and Board Chair dyad is a powerful asset for any organization dedicated to meeting these important goals. When there is trust, transparency and coherence demonstrated between these partners, the rest of the organization can focus on job #1 – improving the health of communities and community members. An effective partnership will enhance the organization’s capacity to communicate with impact and influence to all stakeholders – both internal and external. When that happens, CHCs can more fully realize their intended mission to serve vulnerable people in need of their services.

# About the Author

**Kimberly McNally, MN, RN, BCC**, President, McNally & Associates, is an executive coach, retreat facilitator, and published author based in Seattle, WA. Drawing on 35 years of experience in governance, leadership, education, and clinical positions, she works with leaders, teams and boards to implement her mission... “to improve health care one conversation at a time, from the point-of care to the boardroom”. Kimberly provides high-value executive coaching, organizational assessment, leadership development and retreat facilitation services.

Invested in serving the community, Kimberly is engaged in health care governance at the local, state and national levels. She serves as a governance consultant to the National Association of Community Health Centers (NACHC) and is involved in national efforts to increase the number of nurses on boards.