

Board Chair Assessment

Questions:

What is the best process to receive feedback on the performance of the Board Chair?

What are the best questions to be asked of the board and/or the CEO?

Answers:

If I had to name a “best” process to receive feedback on the performance of the Board Chair, it would be anonymously through online surveys. How often is up to you. And there are numerous questions that can be asked. I offer several ideas and questions below. No matter what, the chair’s performance should certainly be evaluated, and the chair should want and welcome feedback.

At BoardSource, where I served as chair, the board evaluated each meeting, as well as the chair’s performance at each meeting, anonymously via an online survey (1 for strongly disagree to 10 for strongly agree Likert scale), as follows:

The board chair:

- 1. Encourages board members to frame and discuss strategic questions.*
- 2. Facilitates engagement and participation from all board members.*
- 3. Ensures that we have clear resolution on board decisions.*
- 4. Helps us stay focused on board-level topics v. straying into operations.*

What additional comments do you have for the chair?

The results went first to me and the CEO for discussion and were then reported to the full board as part of the pre-read material for the next board meeting.

I found the feedback enormously helpful.

Ratings Questions

Some boards evaluate the chair annually using a standard “strongly disagree-strongly agree” Likert scale and such questions as:

1. The Board Chair runs meetings effectively.
2. The Board Chair is skilled at drawing everyone out appropriately at meetings.
3. The Board Chair encourages trustees to frame and discuss strategic issues.
4. The Board Chair effectively balances listening (letting a board dialogue take its course) with moving the discussion forward.
5. The Board Chair has a good working relationship with trustees and builds trust.
6. From what I can see, the Board Chair has a good working relationship with the CEO.
7. The Board Chair is skilled at bringing discussions to logical conclusions.
8. The Board Chair is able to resolve conflict and create an atmosphere of understanding alternative points of view.
9. The Board Chair effectively concludes meetings by summarizing what they heard and saying what is next.

Open-Ended Questions

Please expand on any questions for which you answered disagree.
Please add any comments you think might be helpful to the Board Chair.

Some boards evaluate the chair along dimensions that arose, or were most relevant, throughout the past year, such as:

1. The Board Chair kept the Board focused on what mattered most throughout the crisis (e.g., COVID-19, racial tensions, social justice, etc.).
2. The Board Chair was an effective communicator throughout the crisis (as above).
3. The Board Chair partnered effectively with the CEO.
4. The Board Chair worked effectively with important organizational constituents throughout the crisis (as above).

Some boards evaluate the chair along with the full board periodically—say, every 2-3 years; however, I do not feel that is an effective process. Chairs should be evaluated at least as often as the CEO, in my opinion, which is annually. I have seen too many boards essentially held hostage by a longstanding mediocre (or even ineffective) chair that no one can unseat because there are no terms or term limits for board members or officers or because there is no opportunity for the board to weigh in so no one confronts the situation. That serves no one well, least of all the CEO and organization. Besides, even good chairs can do better, and great chairs always learn from feedback.

I also think it is a good practice for the CEO to provide feedback to the Board Chair after each meeting. The Chair should ask the CEO:

- How do you think the meeting went?
- What did I do especially well? Where was my leadership / facilitation most helpful?
- Was there anything you wished I had handled differently / anything I could have done better?

In addition, there's a section in my book—*The Practitioner's Guide to Governance as Leadership*—where I cover the CEO-Chair relationship and questions they can ask each other about how things are going (see page 183).

The book can be purchased from Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and BoardSource.