Evaluating the Executive Director

Or Dirty Little Secrets None of Us Like to Admit

Psst. Board member.

Yes, you. Let’s be frank for a moment, shall we?

Being a board member isn’t easy. It demands time you don’t have to be involved in stuff that feels an awful lot like work, and, therefore, not fun. Oh, the cause is easy enough to get behind and be supportive of, but there are only so many hours in the day.

Besides, the ED seems to know what they’re doing. You seem to be making budget numbers. And the last time you asked for more detail on something, you were told that staff didn’t have the bandwidth to put together a full answer to your question.

So, what are you supposed to say about the ED’s performance? It’s not your job to know their job inside and out, is it?

Psst. Executive Director.

Yes, you. Let’s be frank for a moment, shall we?

Your board does not totally “get” the organization and its work, do they? And they sure as heck don’t understand how hard your job is, either. Am I right?

But you kind of like it that way because it makes them easier to manage – YOU’RE the expert and YOU’RE responsible for running things. How are they going to evaluate your performance if they don’t understand your job? And you don’t have time to bring them up to speed because you have funds to raise, staff and volunteers to manage, and financials to review.

Besides, what will you be evaluated on in the first place? What was important to the board at the beginning of the year, or what was important the last time the Chair called you?

Psst. Board member and Executive Director.

Yes, both of you. Honestly, you two need to talk.

Standard or Double standard?

If hiring the ED is the most important thing a board can ever do, then it follows that evaluating the performance of that ED comes a close second. And yet, far too many organizations do not evaluate the performance of their ED in a structured way. In all likelihood, a board that is not evaluating its ED’s performance is also not evaluating its own performance.
So what message does that send the rest of the organization or the rest of the folks involved in your cause? Is there a standard for accountability and performance being modeled right from the board table outward, or is there a double-standard – staff performance is evaluated, but not the ED and not the board.

**Off with their head!**

What is the standard to which the ED is being held? One of the reasons we talk about creating strategic clarity and being able to describe success in the organization is because then it is clear what the ED is supposed to deliver.

What happens far too often instead is either an ED is lauded for 25 random good things that happened in a year and gets rewarded, or an ED is blamed for 25 random bad things that happened in a year and risks losing their job.

Not much of an incentive, then, for an ED to push for a performance review.

As a board member, what kind of culture of accountability are you currently maintaining with YOUR senior executive?

**All or nothing**

One pivotal question for your organization to figure out (if you haven’t already), is whether your Executive Director is wholly responsible for everything that happens in the organization (kind of like Ministerial responsibility in government), or whether their accountability/responsibility is uniquely delineated relative to external events, staff performance, etc.

As a board member, if you were in your ED’s shoes, what standard would you want to be held to?

The upcoming session is, obviously, a sensitive one. But it is also a pivotal one – EDs and Boards must see the performance review as more than an exercise in evaluation. It is an exercise in leadership and accountability by both parties. Evaluating the work of the ED sets the tone for a lot of things in your organization, which means that both the ED and the board have a lot at stake when it comes to getting the process and outcomes right.

You’ll discuss various approaches to conducting a performance review and the various inputs that boards could use. You’ll also talk about the kind of relationship that the ED must have with the board (through the board Chair) and how this plays a significant role in determining how valuable the review process will be.

And, of course, you’ll have the opportunity to think about your organization’s current practices and consider whether there is a need to take things up a notch.

We look forward to seeing you at the session.

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In addition to being a knowledge philanthropist with Vantage Point, Shawn Mitchell is also our Board Chair. Shawn is the Executive Director of VanDusen Botanical Gardens in Vancouver. He has previously held senior management positions with Charity Village, WWF-Canada and the Huntington Society of Canada. He is currently a member of the Peer Review Panel for Imagine Canada’s new Standards Program, and he is a former board member of Mountain Equipment Co-op where he also chaired MEC’s governance committee.