

The Role of the Chair and the Vice Chair



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All too often, management committee meetings are hampered by digressions or an inability to stick to the agenda, meetings take twice as long as they should and no constructive actions have taken place. As a result committee members become frustrated, lose interest in the organisation and often resign either before or at the AGM. The chairperson is pivotal to the structure of the meetings and will need to be an excellent facilitator at planning and running meetings. He or she will help the group deal with differences of opinion and conflicts and make sure that everyone who wants to has a chance to speak. A person elected at the AGM should take the role of the chair for at least one year. It is not good practice to rotate or change the chair at intervals of less than a year (NB. Most constitutions state that a chairperson may only remain in that position for three consecutive years – this is an opportunity to give someone a break who may have become over-committed to the organisation but also to allow new blood into the organisation). Ultimately the chairperson should assist the board in achieving actions for each meeting – if this is not taking place, something is wrong!

The vice-chair stands in for the chair and helps with difficult decisions between meetings. The chairs should liaise regularly with the vice-chair and ensure he or she knows enough about the current issues within the organisation to be able to stand in at short notice. It is usual procedure to turn to the vice-chair if a complaint is to be made about the chairperson. If this is not stated in your constitution then it needs to be reviewed and implemented as soon as possible.

Something which is frequently neglected is the chair's supportive role for managers or co-ordinators. In most cases when paid staff are involved it is expected that the chair will meet with the co-ordinator, at the very least, on a monthly basis to keep up to date with developments. As with any organisation it is expected that the chair will have to make difficult decisions, and if urgent decisions must be made between meetings, the chair must determine whether to call a full committee, or to exercise chair's action. This should be used only for decisions which either genuinely cannot wait or simply did not justify a full committee meeting. Any action taken under the chair's action must be reported to the next management committee meeting.

A good chair/vice-chair should possess the following qualities:

- Leadership skills
- Experience of committee work
- Tact and diplomacy
- Good 'people' skills
- Impartiality and the ability to respect confidences

It is recommended that the chair/vice-chair have an understanding of the work undertaken by the organisation and a wider involvement within the voluntary sector.

Sample - Job Description for a Chairperson

Job title: Chair of _____

The role of the Chair is to lead the board of trustees, ensuring that it fulfils its responsibilities for the governance of the organisation, and when staff are employed, to work in partnership with the manager, helping him or her achieve the aims of the organisation; and to optimise the relationship between the board of trustees and the staff/volunteers. The vice chair acts for the chair when the chair is not available and undertakes assignments at the request of the chair.

The responsibilities of the chair will include:

- Providing leadership for the trustees, enabling the board to act strategically to meet both policies and priorities;
- Planning the annual cycle of board meetings;
- To liaise closely with the secretary about dates, arrangements and agendas for committee meetings;
- Chairing board meetings;
- Monitoring that decisions taken at meetings are implemented;
- Representing the organisational functions, meetings and acting as a spokesman as appropriate

Where staff are employed:

- Liaising with the Chief Executive to keep an overview of the organisation's affairs and to provide support as appropriate;
- Leading the process of appraising the performance of the Chief Executive;
- Sitting on appointment and disciplinary panels.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Disclaimer: This agreement is binding in honour only and is not a contract of employment or legally binding.

Helpful Hints

At the meeting:

- The Chair should start the meeting on time and keep to time limits, nevertheless allowing reasonable time for each item on the agenda.
- Inform the committee of any decisions taken between meetings.
- Facilitate discussion during the meeting, encouraging all members to participate in the decision-making process.
- Bring items on the agenda to a conclusion by a brief review of points (this may involve inviting specific proposals or decisions from the committee).
- If a vote has to be taken, to clarify the voting procedure and enact this procedure (in the event of a tie the chairperson may have the casting vote).
- Inform the committee of any developments, e.g. correspondence has been received or sent on the behalf of the organisation.
- At the close of the meeting to fix arrangements for the next meeting.

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