

# BOARD AND STAFF: Getting the Relationship Right

MICHIGAN SOCIETY OF ASSOCIATION EXECUTIVES (MSAE)

**S**trong associations are built on productive relationships between board members and staff. At its best, this relationship is grounded in trust, clarity, and mutual respect. At its worst, it can create confusion, frustration, and inefficiency. For both board and staff, understanding their respective roles, the boundaries between them, and the qualities of a healthy working relationship is essential to effective governance and organizational success.



## Different Roles, Shared Purpose

Board members and staff share a commitment to the organization's mission, but they contribute in different ways.

The board's role is to provide broad direction, oversight, and accountability. This includes setting strategy, ensuring financial health, monitoring organizational outcomes, and looking ahead to what the organization will need in the future.

The staff's role is to lead, manage, and implement the organization's work. Staff develop plans, run programs, serve members, and handle day-to-day operations.

A helpful way to think about it is this: the board focuses on what and why. Staff focus on how. Neither role is more important than the other—but they are not interchangeable.

## Understanding Authority Matters

One of the most common sources of confusion is authority.

Board members often bring significant expertise and leadership experience. But individual board

members do not have authority on their own. Authority rests with the board as a whole and is exercised through formal decisions.

The board's primary connection to the organization runs through the chief staff executive (CSE). The board hires, supports, and evaluates this individual, and in turn, the CSE is responsible for the staff and operations.

This means:

- Board members do not supervise staff
- Staff do not report to individual board members
- Direction to staff comes through the CSE, not from individual board members

These boundaries are not about limiting involvement, they are about ensuring clarity, consistency, and accountability.

## Communication and Interaction

Board members and staff will naturally interact, and those interactions can be productive and valuable when handled thoughtfully.

Board members should ask questions, seek context, and request information that helps them fulfill their

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## “Even well-intentioned boards and staff can fall into patterns that weaken the relationship.”

governance, oversight, and strategic responsibilities. Requests should be tied to the board’s work and decision-making, not made out of personal interest or curiosity, since unnecessary requests can consume valuable staff time and organizational resources.

Staff, in turn, should provide relevant information, data, and context appropriate to the board member’s role and the specific matter before the board.

Special requests from either direction should be routed through the chief staff executive to preserve clarity, coordination, and accountability.

### When Communication Gets Off Track

Communication is off track when board members appear to instruct or provide oversight of individual staff members, or when staff members express opinions or lobby preferences to board members. These behaviors create confusion, strain relationships, and erode trust.

As the vital link between the board and staff, the board chair and the CSE are key to cultivating healthy communication patterns and ensuring there are no surprises on either side.

### Common Pitfalls

Even well-intentioned boards and staff can fall into patterns that weaken the relationship. Some of the most common include:

- Board members stepping into operational decisions or staff dynamics
- Staff bypassing the CSE to influence the board
- Over-reliance on a single board member for guidance or decision-making
- Informal conversations turning into unofficial direction or commitments

These situations are rarely intentional, but they can quickly erode clarity and trust if left unaddressed.

### Professional Boundaries Matter

Positive working relationships between board members and staff are essential. Respect, openness, and a shared commitment to the mission create the foundation for effective governance. At the same time, these relationships should remain professional.

Board members should avoid developing relationships with staff that could blur roles, compromise objectivity, or create real or perceived favoritism. Doing so protects the integrity of the board’s oversight role and the CSE’s leadership of the staff.

Romantic relationships between board members and staff are strongly discouraged. If such a relationship exists or develops, it should be disclosed promptly and managed in accordance with the organization’s conflict-of-interest policies. Transparency helps protect the organization, the individuals involved, and the trust others place in both.

### A Partnership That Works

When board members and staff each understand their roles and respect the boundaries that come with them, the relationship becomes a powerful partnership.

The board brings perspective, judgment, and a focus on the future.

Staff bring expertise, execution, and a focus on results.

Together, they create an organization that is not only well-run, but well-governed—capable of serving its mission today while preparing for what comes next.

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