



# THE ESSENTIAL ROLES of the Board Chair

Michigan Society of Association Executives (MSAE)

**T**he board chair holds one of the most important volunteer leadership roles in an association. While the exact responsibilities vary and are outlined in the organization’s bylaws and policies, the chair’s primary task is to help the board function well as a governing body focused on mission, strategy, accountability, and the long-term interests of the association.

## Leader of the Board

An effective chair keeps the board on track. That includes presiding over meetings, shaping agendas with the chief staff executive, guiding discussion, encouraging full participation, and helping the board stay at the governance level rather than drifting into operational detail. The chair helps ensure the board's time is spent on the issues that matter most: direction, performance, major risks, resources, and stewardship.

## Coach & Sherpa

The chair also plays an important role in board culture and accountability. When conflict arises, participation weakens, or a board member's behavior becomes counterproductive, disengaged, or misaligned with expectations, it is incumbent upon the chair to address it. That may mean clarifying roles, coaching a fellow board member, restoring focus, or helping the board work through tension constructively. Healthy, productive boards rarely happen by accident; most often, they are led and supported by intentional and strategic chairs.

## Partner to the Chief Staff Executive

Equally important is the chair's partnership with the chief staff executive. The chair does not run the organization, and the chief staff executive does not govern it. Instead, they work together to prepare the board for effective decision-making, clarify priorities, and maintain a productive relationship between governance and management. In many associations, the chair coordinates the board's oversight of the chief staff executive's performance and support. When this partnership is grounded in trust, clarity, and mutual respect, it strengthens both the board's governance and the association's overall effectiveness.

At its best, the role of the board chair is one of facilitative leadership, discipline, and stewardship. By helping the board stay focused, engaged, and effective, the chair strengthens the association's ability to fulfill its mission and serve its members well.

Copyright © 2026 Michigan Society of Association Executives. Permission is granted to copy, share, and distribute this article for educational and noncommercial use, provided it is reproduced in full and attribution to MSAE is included.

*Harness the power of print advertising*



**MSAE**  
MICHIGAN SOCIETY OF ASSOCIATION EXECUTIVES

Contact Eric TODAY for  
more information.



*Eric Bolf*

Print Sales Director

w: 231-674-5369

c: 231-620-4767

Eric.Bolf@vpdcs.com