Career Defining Decisions
[Association – Chamber Article – 12-05]

As the associations/chamber CEO, I’m often the first employee to show up at the office. This day I put my key in the door but it does not budge. I’m sure it’s the right key but it does not give me access.

“Why won’t it open?” Moments later I recall the recent meeting that didn’t go so well. I wonder, “did someone make changes without telling me?”

The vignette is not exaggerated --- it is an option of the board of directors to change the locks. The cause and effect could be called a “career defining decision.”

A career defining decision (CDD) describes an action by a CEO that has influence on his or her future. The right decisions can advance one’s career --- most CDDs are known for their disastrous outcomes.

For example, imagine the consequence of a confident chamber exec telling the chairman of the board; “Please don’t come by the office without an appointment.” The writing’s on the wall for this exec!

Cautionary Tales

The newspaper’s editor asks for a copy of the chamber’s federal tax return for two year ago. The busy CEO thinks about it and says, “I’ll have to get back to you on that one.”

The CEO intended but forgot to ask the board about divulging such sensitive information.

A month later she reads the business section headline: Chamber Refuses to Disclose Public Records.

She calls the chairman of the board and says something about protecting the chamber and not understanding the request. The chair replies that the board is embarrassed by the headline. Soon after the board votes to hire a new exec.

Strategic Facilitator

The board is ready to update its strategic plan. The planning task force asks about facilitators and the CEO says he’ll do it --- rationalizing it will save money and nobody can do a better job.

At the planning retreat, he stands by the flip chart poised to write. Some board members notice he writes down the things he wants for the chamber and don’t listen as attentively to their ideas.
After a couple of hours they’re frustrated that he has nixed ideas with comments like, “we don’t have the staff,” and “the committee could never accomplish that.” The directors are angry, complaining to the chairman in a closed-door session.

The appropriate role for an executive at a retreat is similar to that of the directors. One wants to be in a position at the table to carefully listen and offer input. It is impractical for the CEO to man the flipchart, monitor the meeting and participate in the planning process --- in hopes of saving money.

**Board Assessment**

Leave the board assessment process up to the chairman of the board.

A bad career decision would be to say, “I know other boards conduct an evaluation of the volunteers so I am going to pass out this 20 question test and want you all to fill it out for me.”

Let the assessment come from the chairman. It is the chair’s desire to make improvements in governance.

A board chair might distribute an assessment tool near the end of his or her term, saying, “since this is my last meeting as your chair, I want your input as to how to make improvements in our board.” This could lead to a discussion, or the directors could complete the assessment tool and return it to the chair or a task force to consider.

**Nominating Process**

“I’ve got just the members I want to see in office next year,” said the chamber exec. Low and behold --- only one of those members became an officer – the other new officers hold a grudge against the CEO for recommending his or her “preferred candidates.”

An appropriate CEO role is to ensure that a qualified slate of nominees is presented. It could be a CDD to offer a list of preferred candidates. Remain impartial, provide fair information and be available to vet candidates when asked or the opportunity arises.

**CEO Performance Evaluation**

Some board chairs are neither versed in nor comfortable in conducting the CEO performance evaluation of the executive director. An inexperienced chair may become creative in the process, suggesting, “I’ve never done a performance review, so let’s survey the members see how they think you’re doing in your job.”

The appropriate role is to develop a system for performance review in which the chairman and board are comfortable. Encourage periodic or annual reviews by making it systemic, not personal. Inform the board that their insights and input are valued.
To Audit or Not to Audit

The treasurer calls to say, “While I’m in office I don’t think we need one of those $5,000 financial audits.” The CEO concurs, thinking the savings can be used for other needs. Naturally, that will be the year a significant problem arises with finances.

Rely on the chamber’s bylaws and/or policy on audits rather than siding with the treasurer who has the position for usually just one-year.

Summary

Seeing the big picture, and understanding the mission, bylaws and policies, should guide a CEO in making career-wise decisions. Career defining decisions are often instant poor judgements without regard to processes, governance and long-term objectives.

Note: Bob Harris, CAE, offers governance and management at his website, www.nonprofitcenter.com. Readers will find board assessment tools, CEO performance samples, and strategic planning templates among the 100s of free pages.