Success Patterns of ICSO Executives

Phase II: Board Chair Perspectives

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International Civil Society Centre

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INTRODUCTION

The work of civil society organizations has never been more consequential. This is manifest in the dire and almost immediate consequences when the funding to these organizations is cut dramatically, necessitating corresponding cuts to services. So much of the progress made in recent decades in areas such as combating infectious disease, addressing widespread malnutrition, and eliminating extreme poverty has been tragically set back over just the past year.

Given the invaluable role civil society plays, effective leadership of organizations in the sector is critical. Their chief executives are often leading complex, widely dispersed organizations that are pursuing their missions under the most challenging, sometimes even hostile conditions they have ever encountered. Some challenges are external (e.g., political and financial pressures), while others are internal (e.g., competing interests across entities within the organization). These circumstances heighten the need for boards to select, support, and retain leaders who can effectively navigate multiple demands.

In 2025, we initiated a research project among senior leaders of international civil society organizations (ICSOs) and non-profits with the intent of better understanding the factors that influenced their success and impact as chief executives. The findings and our recommendations from this initial phase of research (Phase I) can be found at the ICSC website or the Conner Advisory website.

In this second phase of research, we explored board chairs' perspectives on selecting new chief executives, building strong working relationships with these executives, and providing the kind of support most needed to successfully deliver on their missions.

In our discussions with chief executives last year, we were reminded about how difficult their jobs are even under the best of circumstances. While chief executives of ICSOs and non-profits do not experience certain pressures that their counterparts in the private sector must deal with (e.g., incessant shareholder demands for profits and healthy returns), they must contend with multiple stakeholders—anxious staff, demanding donors, restless leaders of member organizations in their network, and of course their boards—who often have conflicting interests and demands. All of this is made even more challenging by the external circumstances in which many leaders now find themselves.

One of our hypotheses at the outset of our research was that the onslaught of threats and crises generated by these external challenges (some of them existential) was prompting many chief executives to leave their posts. This turned out not to be supported by the data. Instead, the challenges that most frequently led to executives' decisions to leave their posts were internal.[1]

Chief executives seemed to struggle the most when they lacked a good working relationship with their board (especially with the board chair) or did not feel that their board provided the right kind and/or level of support on matters such as strategy, key personnel decisions, and crisis management. These issues made a tough job even tougher. For some, it was an untenable situation, and they left.

These findings prompted us to ask how board chairs would describe the nature and development of their relationships with their chief executives and the kinds of support they offered, especially during times of significant crisis or opportunity. Separately, we noted that most chief executives in our initial study were external hires, and we wanted to know what accounted for this phenomenon. Since board chairs are most often the "hiring managers," we were keen to learn their perspectives on executive succession planning, recruitment, selection, leadership development, and retention. These inquiries were what prompted Phase II of our research, which we describe herein.

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[1] We recognize that challenging external circumstances can often exacerbate the effects of poor relationships and inadequate support (what we label internal challenges). However, we did not see a pattern that external challenges *caused* poor relationships between the chief executive and board chair or *caused* the board to provide inadequate support to the executive.

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH APPROACH

In early 2026, we interviewed 20 former and current board chairs from 18 different organizations. The average tenure as board chair in our sample was just under four years. Most had served on their organization's board before being elected as chair. The organizations they represented ranged in size from under $10 million in annual revenue to over $3 billion. Their missions were diverse: from responding to humanitarian crises to providing long-term development aid, from pursuing social justice to defending human rights. The governance models represented in our sample included unitary organizations, federated networks, and movements. All had international footprints.

While the conversations we had with board chairs were wide-ranging, we focused our attention on three broad areas:

- How boards ensure that they select and retain effective chief executives
- How board chairs build and maintain constructive working relationships with their chief executive officers
- How board chairs support their chief executives, especially during crises or major change implementation

SELECTING AND RETAINING EFFECTIVE CHIEF EXECUTIVES

It can be argued that one of the most consequential actions of a board is selecting the chief executive for their organization. A good selection can open the door to many years of progress toward fulfilling the organization's mission. A bad selection (or, for that matter, frequent turnover at the top) can hurt staff morale, compromise the mission, and eventually harm the organization's reputation and impact. For these reasons, we were curious as to how prepared boards are for the inevitable circumstance of selecting a new chief executive and retaining them.

To evaluate this preparedness, we explored the following questions:

- Do policies or practices exist for identifying potential future chief executives?
- Does the organization have robust processes and practices for recruiting the executives they want?
- What experience, expertise, and predisposition are boards looking for in a future chief executive?
- And finally, are there strategies for retaining executive talent once it is secured?

Planning for succession

When asked, most board chairs in our sample shared that succession planning *should* be a board priority but currently was not. A handful of chairs even said that this topic was on their short list of objectives to implement in the coming months. However, we found that this intention was the exception, not the rule. The norm seemed to be that boards scrambled to tackle the urgent problem of succession only when confronted by a chief executive announcing their imminent departure or by the board's decision to ask the executive to leave.

Fewer than a quarter of the boards in our sample had invested in creating a pipeline of possible successors (internal and/or external) and implemented a succession process. In two cases, a senior leader was hired in advance from outside the organization to join the executive team as a possible successor to the current chief executive. This probationary-like period gave the board and the incumbent executive time to assess whether the newly hired leader could be an effective successor. It also gave the potential chief executive candidate the opportunity to develop a deep knowledge of the organization as well as to build strong relationships with key players and the board. In two other instances, the current chief executives (with their boards' support) identified strong internal candidates and helped prepare them to transition to the top leadership role over a period of time.

Interestingly, we found reluctance among some chairs and their chief executives to discuss succession with one another. Some board chairs expressed their fear that, by discussing succession, their executive would take it as a sign that the board had lost confidence in them and was preparing to terminate the executive in the foreseeable future. Other board chairs avoided a potentially awkward conversation with the incumbent altogether in the belief that a change in the chief executive position was not imminent and would likely occur on someone else's watch.

Meanwhile, many chief executives we spoke with in Phase I feared that if they broached the topic of succession with their chairs, they would be suspected of having plans to leave sooner rather than later. The result was that we found few chief executives and board chairs proactively discussing plans for the day when new leadership would need to be selected. This put their organizations at risk of having periods where the leadership role is in limbo while waiting for a permanent replacement to be identified, named, and put in place.

Several major organizations in the sector have recently experienced leadership changes (sometimes multiple changes in a relatively short period of time) that resulted in interim leadership arrangements while their boards identified and appointed permanent replacements. These extended periods of uncertainty about leadership at the executive level (some lasting up to a year) were almost always disruptive to these organizations. Strategic decisions got delayed until the new leader was in place; change initiatives slowed down in the absence of strong executive sponsorship; and staff worried about their futures while waiting to hear what the new leader's priorities would be. Our takeaway was that any steps a board can take to minimize the risks of these kinds of disruptions by anticipating and planning for succession in advance can only be helpful.

Recruiting candidates

The overwhelming majority of chief executives we interviewed in Phase I were external hires. While our sample was small, this pattern is consistent with our general observations across the sector. If, indeed, most chief executives in civil society are hired from outside their organizations, as opposed to being developed and promoted internally, it places a premium on the board's ability to recruit executive-level talent.

Interestingly, the approach to recruitment in most organizations in our sample followed a similar pattern. When confronted with the need to replace the chief executive, most organizations typically formed subcommittees of their boards and retained the services of professional search firms. The recruiting process and timeline were usually defined and managed by the outside search firm and typically began with extensive up-front interviews with board members, current executives, and other key stakeholders (e.g., leaders of other member organizations in a federation) to determine specific leadership qualifications needed for the search. Once the profile for a new executive was agreed upon with the board search committee, the search for candidates commenced.

It is not unusual for the search for (and subsequent vetting of) a new chief executive to take several months to complete. A few board chairs shared that it took more than a year before a suitable executive was recruited. Regardless of the time the recruiting process took, most boards found it necessary to appoint an interim chief executive—frequently someone from the board or from the existing senior management team. This prolonged search and temporary executive leadership extended the periods of uncertainty and disruption in the organization, as previously noted.

Choosing the new chief executive

When we asked board chairs what they look for in a prospective executive, sector-specific experience and technical expertise came up less often than we had expected. Instead, chairs most often emphasized soft leadership skills like emotional intelligence, humility, resilience, communication skills, and the ability to listen and build trust across diverse stakeholders. One chair mentioned a framework of "competency + care," which represented the desire for the chief executive to be capable of handling both the professional and emotional needs of the organization. Another chair summarized this ambition as "head, heart, and hands," or expecting that a leader comes in with a comprehensive ability to address intellectual, emotional, and practical aspects of the position equally well.

For leaders of federations, we often heard about the need for executives who were coalition builders and diplomats. Several chairs explicitly said they valued candidates who were "opinionated but not overconfident" and who were willing to change their views after considering new information and/or compelling alternatives offered by their boards. Finally, given the turmoil and uncertainty within which civil society organizations have been operating and will continue to operate for the foreseeable future, we heard several board chairs highlight the need to select executives who could successfully lead organizational change when circumstances warranted significant shifts.[2]

In addition to these leadership qualities, selection criteria seemed to be influenced by the success of the outgoing chief executive (one board chair said he would love to have a clone of the current chief executive) or by that individual's lack of success. In a few cases, the geographic, gender, or ethnic identity of the leader was also part of the selection criteria when the organization deemed it necessary to match these attributes to the organizational culture or to decolonization efforts. Consistent with our observation that few organizations had a practice of developing internal talent for the top job, only occasionally were the selection criteria influenced by the desire to consider internal candidates.

Reaching consensus on the selection criteria was not always a quick and easy process. We heard about several instances where there were significant differences of opinion among board members (or among leaders across a federation) on the leadership qualities required in a new chief executive. For example, some board members in one organization believed they needed a transformational leader who would dramatically shake up the status quo, while other board members were looking for a leader who would implement needed changes more gradually over time. In another case, some member organizations advocated for a leader who would better represent the interests of the members of the Global South (aka the Global Majority), while others insisted on a chief executive who prioritized the interests of the largest funding organizations (in this case, primarily European and North American member organizations). In both examples, while the interests between factions did not match up neatly, a final set of selection criteria was eventually achieved—in one case through

[2] See "Leading Successful Change Amidst a Disruptive INGO Environment" by Conner Advisory.

extensive discussions leading to significant compromises by both parties and in the other by capitulation of one side.

Retaining the chief executive

Selecting a new chief executive can be a prolonged, costly, and challenging process. Once completed, it is in everyone's interest for the board to create the conditions that help the new chief executive most effectively achieve whatever goals they have been hired to pursue. In Phase I of this research, we learned from chief executives that two of the most powerful levers a board chair has to retain their executive leader are 1) establishing a strong, positive working relationship with that leader and 2) providing relevant and timely board support.

While it was not a guarantee that executives were retained when these conditions were met, the risk of losing a chief executive was heightened when satisfaction of the conditions was weak or nonexistent. (We explore these two topics—building a strong working relationship between the chief executive and the board chair and providing necessary and timely board support—in greater detail in the following sections of this report.)

Several chairs mentioned an additional area relevant to retention: being attentive to the personal needs and struggles of the chief executive. An example of this was one chair's support of their executive's move from one continent to another to accommodate family needs. Another was a chair's suggestion that their chief executive hire a deputy or chief of staff to offload some of the many demands on the leader's time and energy, with the aim of preventing burnout. When possible, these chairs felt it was important to find face-to-face time (often in informal settings) with their chief executives in order to assess their executives' state of mind as well as their physical and emotional well-being.

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING CONSTRUCTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

As mentioned above, many executives in the first phase of our research considered strong, positive working relationships with their boards to be one of the biggest factors contributing to their sustained tenure and impact at an organization. Some of the executives in our sample who left their roles early in their tenure or who chose not to renew their contracts cited the problematic nature of their relationships with their boards as a significant reason for their decisions to leave. For example, some executives shared that they were unable to secure the board's support for their vision and strategy for the future. Others had the sense that their board had simply lost confidence in their leadership. We were interested in learning how board chairs viewed this dynamic.

The overwhelming majority of board chairs in Phase II of our research described their relationships with their chief executives as productive, though not always perfect. The character of the relationships across our sample, however, was quite varied, with some described as warm, supportive, and personal, while others were described as distant, formal, and at times antagonistic. Some chairs characterized their relationships as working well from the start, while others reported that they achieved productive working relationships only after considerable time and effort. Despite these variations, we found four common characteristics that defined strong relationships:

- Establishing a foundation of trust
- Clarifying roles and boundaries
- Creating alignment
- Managing differences

Establishing a foundation of trust

It is a truism that trust is not built overnight but rather develops over time. Some board chairs shared how they intentionally built this foundation of trust with their chief executive. Their efforts frequently involved spending time with their chief executive at dinners, on trips, or around shared interests. Other board chairs reported that trust gradually emerged through the course of their routine interactions with their executive. Regardless of approach, trust was generally defined by one or more of the following characteristics: 1) the quality of *communications* between the chief executive and the board chair, 2) the chief executive's track record in delivering on promises and c*ommitments*, and 3) the judgment and skill with which the chief executive navigated *crises*.

While the frequency of communications between board chairs and their chief executives in our sample varied from weekly to monthly, chairs highlighted the need for regular, predictable contact as well as ad hoc interactions as circumstances warranted. They spoke about their desire for open and frank discussions about issues, challenges, and risks. Several chairs mentioned insisting on a "no surprises" rule.

Other chairs highlighted their chief executives' consistency in delivering on commitments as being paramount in establishing trust. This included timely follow-up on promises made to the board (e.g., delivering additional information or analyses that the board requested); decisions (often difficult ones) on matters of personnel, strategy, or operations; actions to be executed; and results to be produced. Chief executives who failed to consistently deliver on commitments, especially those under their complete control, undermined the board's trust in them.

The past year (2025) presented numerous moments when difficult decisions and quick actions needed to be taken to address the sector's challenging operational environment. Several chairs commented on how their trust in their chief executives was deepened by how deftly these crises were navigated. One chair shared how their chief executive recommended taking a less adversarial approach toward the new U.S. administration. This position was at odds with the general sentiment in the sector and within the organization itself. Enormous pressure was put on this chief executive to join other NGOs in publicly opposing the government's decisions. However, the chief executive prevailed in convincing her board of the wisdom of taking a more conciliatory tone in discussions with government officials. In fact, this chief executive's approach to the administration turned out favorably, as the organization emerged with significant funding despite the U.S. government's draconian cuts to most organizations in the sector.

Just as trust often develops over time, it can also be lost quite quickly. We heard examples where the board lost trust in their chief executive when the board perceived that they had been left in the dark on important issues. Trust was also undermined, according to some chairs, when their executives failed to respond quickly or boldly enough to unfolding crises or threats. On the other side, as our Phase I research revealed, chief executives lost trust in their board chairs when the chairs were found "going around" the chief executive to gather additional information or perspectives from other leaders in the organization. This perceived breakdown in (or complete lack of) trust between the board chair and the chief executive was a significant factor in some executives' decisions to leave their organizations.

Clarifying roles and boundaries

Most organizations in the sector have governance documents and practices that define the distinct roles of their boards and of management. However, even the most detailed descriptions leave room for interpretation and potential disagreement. It is not unusual for new chief executives or new board chairs to come to their positions with different expectations of their respective roles that lie in this grey zone. Prior experiences as leaders and/or as board members shape these expectations.

A constant refrain we heard in the interviews with chairs was the importance of clarifying the role of the board versus executive management in the areas of strategy, oversight, and operations. The boundaries differed from organization to organization depending on their circumstances and governance policies, but one constant was the attention chairs and chief executives paid to establishing guardrails to prevent board overreach or micromanagement. One chair summed up his guiding principle as “noses in, fingers out.” Another shared that he had to be vigilant about checking his board’s tendency to meddle in management affairs.

The interviews revealed that, often, this clarification of roles between the chief executive and the chair and of boundaries between the board and management evolved over time. Patterns emerged through the course of interactions of management and the board, and norms were established organically.

Some chairs, however, spoke of having explicit conversations with their chief executives regarding such items as decision rights or the board’s purpose (e.g., strategic and fiscal oversight versus operational involvement). This is what we labelled “clarification by design.” One chair described a structured governance document that he and the chief executive hammered out during the new chair’s first three months of working with the chief executive. Over a series of discussions, they outlined their respective domains (i.e., which decisions were the purview of management and which required the board’s involvement), communication standards (frequency, level of detail, character, etc.), and how to collaborate when crises arose. At the conclusion of these discussions, they codified their understanding of roles and boundaries in a jointly signed document that they circulated among the executive leadership team and the board. This agreement served as the “terms of reference” in their interactions going forward.

It should be noted that we found this kind of intentional, systematic approach to negotiating the terms of the chair–chief executive relationship to be the exception rather than the rule among the chairs in our sample. Indeed, some chief executives interviewed in Phase I preferred not to have the terms of the relationship spelled out and formalized. They believed that this could “paint them into a box” and limit their freedom to exercise their power and influence.

When there are differing perspectives on roles and boundaries, conflict between the board and management is almost guaranteed. A complaint from many chief executives in Phase I was their frustration when their boards insisted on weighing in on (or even dictating) many operational decisions. In instances where perceived overreach became the norm, some chief executives decided to leave their organizations.

Creating alignment

Boards most often choose new executives due to the belief that the new leader has the skills, experience, and temperament to effectively achieve objectives the board deems necessary. These objectives may include creating and executing a new strategy, implementing much-needed organizational changes, navigating a particularly challenging funding or political environment, and more. The opportunities, threats, and objectives that an organization needs to address are often the focus of discussions during the recruitment process and play a big part in the selection of one candidate over another. However, time and again we discovered that the board and the chief executive often have different interpretations of the leader's mandate and what results they are expected to achieve.

For instance, one executive was hired because of his track record as a transformational leader. This was exactly what his board felt was needed for an organization that had stalled in its growth, influence, and impact. However, the nature of the transformational mandate that the chief executive believed he had been given turned out to be at odds with what his board defined as the extent of change needed as well as how the board believed such major shifts should be pursued. After considerable effort and time trying to calibrate expectations, the board finally decided that they needed a different leader: one who would pursue organizational change but who would do so in a manner that was less disruptive to the organization's staff and more consistent with the board's expectations.

So, how is this alignment between board expectations and chief executive performance achieved? It starts with the executive and the board chair developing a shared understanding of the circumstances the organization finds itself in and the board's vision for the future. For instance, what is the most urgent goal: growth in a challenging environment, survival in the near to medium term, or transformation of the organization to be nimbler and more adaptable in the future?

Two potential sources for creating alignment were mentioned in our interviews. Some chairs pointed to using the intent of the organization's strategy—what does successful realization of the strategy look like?—while others pointed to using the organization's mission as the North Star—what does fulfilling our mission and delivering our desired impact look like?

The experience of one chief executive interviewed in Phase I illustrates why aligning expectations is so critical. He felt that his board had not adequately communicated what they expected the chief executive to accomplish in his first year. The executive had had the impression that the board wanted him to bring his extensive field experience to bear on strengthening their program strategy. However, over the course of several months in the role, this chief executive realized that the board chair had other important expectations, especially concerning the organization's fundraising capacity and operational efficiency—areas that were outside this executive's experience and expertise. This led to frustration, underperformance, and eventually the dismissal of the chief executive.

Managing differences

As in any important professional relationship, differences of opinion between executives and their board chairs are inevitable. The means for addressing and resolving differences varied widely among the chairs we spoke with. However, one theme that emerged was summed up by one of the chairs as "private candor, public unity." In other words, differences were discussed in one-on-one interactions (e.g., during private calls or over a meal or drinks) outside the view of the board and the executive team until some level of agreement was achieved. That said, we also heard of instances where the differences were aired openly by chairs at board meetings with the chief executives present. Whether this was the intent or not, chief executives reported feeling exposed and unsupported when this occurred. These public disagreements were a factor in some executives' decisions to leave their organizations.

The four elements identified for building and maintaining constructive relationships between chairs and their chief executives—establishing trust, clarifying roles, creating alignment, and managing differences—are not an exhaustive list, nor do they take into account the idiosyncrasies of different personality types that characterize many relationships. However, they represent the most frequently mentioned perspectives that chairs used when describing their relationships with chief executives.

ONGOING SUPPORT TO THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

In addition to highlighting the importance of their relationship with their board chairs, the chief executives in Phase I spoke to how the nature and level of board support (or lack thereof) impacted their success. Some talked about how their boards "had their backs" as the leaders made important decisions and took bold actions. Others described working closely with their boards to formulate strategies to address crucial issues, be they threats or opportunities.

These experiences were not universal, however. Some chief executives believed that they had been successful despite their boards' ineffective attempts at helping. These leaders saw either the nature or the level of support as inadequate or even counterproductive. Moreover, a minority of executives shared that they felt that their boards were "missing in action" at critical moments when board support would have been useful. This left these leaders feeling exposed and vulnerable, and most left their organizations as a result.

Given this range of executive experiences, we were interested in the nature of the support that boards provided to chief executives and their teams. Four areas emerged from our conversations—namely how the boards supported their chief executives by:

- Helping to navigate challenging external circumstances
- Mediating internal challenges
- Ensuring sufficient resources to achieve key objectives
- Enhancing the chief executive's leadership effectiveness

Helping to navigate challenging external circumstances

The past few years have presented an abundance of challenges to leaders across civil society, not the least of which was the drastic reduction of foreign assistance by the U.S. government in early 2025. We were impressed in our Phase I conversations with chief executives that the threats and challenges they encountered often brought out the best in these leaders and their organizations. Instead of driving leaders out of their roles (which was one of our working hypotheses), these circumstances often provided opportunities for leaders to step up and take decisive actions.

We asked board chairs about this observation and what role they might have played, if any, to enable their executives to handle crises effectively. Almost all shared that, at a minimum, they had provided emotional or moral support during these crises—giving assurances to their leaders when difficult actions needed to be taken. Some talked about being thought partners or sounding boards to the chief executive as various courses of action (often difficult ones) were being considered. Finally, some chairs described how they volunteered to "take the heat" for unpopular or disruptive decisions.

In the absence of this support, chief executives reported in Phase I that they felt exposed and left to sink or swim on their own. Most in this situation decided to leave their organizations.

Mediating internal challenges

As a reminder, our Phase I research suggested that one of the leading contributors to chief executives leaving their posts was their frustration in dealing with internal challenges—with their staff, executive team members, boards, and other member organizations in their networks (e.g., in the case of federations and movements). Several chairs in our Phase II sample described their support role as mediating conflicts and managing tensions between these various entities and their chief executives. One chair shared how they played the role of disruptor in a federation dispute, which allowed the chief executive to be the diplomat and reach a compromise with the other parties. Another chair shared how they sometimes played the role of "bad cop" to allow the chief executive to play "good cop" when dealing with internal disputes. A third chair shared how they had to play the role of referee when the tension between the chief executive and another key executive became toxic and disruptive to the rest of the team. What all these examples have in common is that the chair saw their role as resolving or at least deescalating situations that could derail the critical work of their chief executive.

As we explored the nature of board chairs' relationships with and support of senior leaders, the chairs in our sample also highlighted that boards themselves may create internal challenges that complicate the chair's relationships with senior management. In more than one case, in fact, it appeared to us that some organizations had lost (or nearly lost) effective leaders due to tensions among board members. One vivid example from Phase I involved a chief executive who had earned the trust and confidence of their chair only to resign their position due to unaddressed struggles with a small cadre of new board members.

Ensuring sufficient resources

In our experience working with leaders across the sector, chief executives rarely possess all the resources they feel are needed to make headway on critical initiatives. These resources include, among other things, the provision of adequate funding, access to needed external expertise, and sufficient time to achieve ambitious goals. Virtually all the chairs we spoke with highlighted their role in ensuring that the organization had sufficient resources to achieve its most critical goals. Two categories of resources stood out for us.

The first is the limited time and energy available to chief executives to deal with all the demands coming their way. Even the most capable and resilient leaders have limits. As mentioned earlier in this report, some board chairs shared how they are particularly attentive to the risk of losing an effective leader to burnout and that they tried to help mitigate this risk by offering help. Sometimes this help came in the form of the board chair taking on some of the demands themselves. In one case, this meant managing the relationships with difficult and time-consuming stakeholders. In another, the board recommended and funded a chief of staff role to offload some internal tasks, freeing the chief executive to focus on fundraising and stakeholder management.

The other category arose from several chairs volunteering their concerns about the depth and competence of the chief executives' senior leadership team. Most chairs reported feeling reluctant to explicitly demand replacement of leaders about whom they had concerns, seeing the hiring/firing of staff as management's role. However, these chairs expressed their concern that unless there was action (sometimes urgent action) to address the shortcomings among the executive leadership team, the realization of critical goals could be in jeopardy. They felt that their most potent weapon was to ensure that the performance of the questionable leader(s) was front and center in their exchanges with the chief executive.

Enhancing leadership effectiveness

Chief executives are selected for a variety of reasons—among them their experience, expertise, and predisposition. Most, but not all, executives come with a track record of leading teams, if not entire organizations. However, past success does not guarantee future success in another organization. Difficulties can arise due to circumstances the leader is unprepared to handle, challenges they have never encountered, or a culture that is at odds with their preferred operating mode, among other factors.

Few organizations in our sample seemed to invest in their chief executives' skills for effectively managing the complexities that come with leading large, global organizations. In fact, we found little evidence that boards saw leadership development (formal or informal) as a major factor in helping a chief executive excel in their role. Instead, there were strong expectations that incoming chief executives already possess the adaptability, resilience, and ability to develop their skillsets on the job as required. Only a handful of chairs pointed to coaching (in areas such as interacting with the board, leading their teams, and managing their relationships with other stakeholders) as an important element of their role in supporting their chief executives. This seemed to be more common in situations where the leaders were new to the chief executive role or came from outside the sector. Otherwise, leadership development in the form of executive coaching, peer exchanges, or professional development courses was expected to be initiated and pursued by the chief executives themselves.

REFLECTIONS ON OUR FINDINGS

Over the past 18 months, we have had the privilege of interviewing 40 leaders from some of the most significant organizations in the international civil society sector—half of them current and former chief executives and the other half current or former board chairs. While this sample was relatively small given the enormous scale of the global sector, the insights we gained from these conversations suggested a number of important practices associated with the chief executives' impact on their organizations and success in the pursuit of their missions. The previous sections in this report have highlighted the perspectives shared by board chairs on leadership succession, strong relationships with their chief executives, and the support provided to their executives. Below are our reflections on these findings.

Unequal positive sentiment

We were fortunate that 10 of the board chairs in the second phase of this research were from the same organizations whose chief executives had participated in the initial phase of our study. This afforded us the opportunity to compare perspectives of these chief executives and their board chairs. One of the first striking contrasts was that, on the whole, board chairs described their relationships with their chief executives in more positive terms. They also seemed more confident that the nature and level of support the board was providing to senior management was appropriate and adequate. Finally, they were (again as a group) more optimistic about the future of their organizations and the sector as a whole. This is not to say that all their respective chief executives whom we interviewed in Phase I were unhappy with their relationships with the board chairs, dissatisfied with the support they were receiving, or pessimistic about the future health of their organizations. It seemed to us, however, that chief executives were more likely to share their critiques, fears, and frustrations about their board interactions than board chairs were likely to share the same about their chief executives.

Owning versus executing strategy

Another observation that emerged for us was the chief executive's role in shaping the strategic direction and priorities for their organization (versus executing the direction and priorities set by their board). Most chief executives with whom we spoke in Phase I assumed that a key element of their job was to chart the future of their organizations (with board approval, of course). In Phase II, we found that the majority of board chairs agreed with this perspective.

As such, the view that the board's role was to support the achievement of *the chief executive's agenda* had implications for whom a board hired and the nature of the support that a board provided to the chief executive. We found that boards with this mindset looked for executive candidates who had experience in creating and executing their strategic visions. Moreover, board chairs shared how they intentionally provided and protected the space for the chief executive and the senior management team to make strategic decisions and take the actions they deemed necessary. Boards that operated from this perspective were careful to avoid interfering with or second-guessing the chief executive's decisions and actions.

However, not all board chairs we interviewed shared the view that the chief executive is the chief architect of an organization's strategy. As one chair summarized it, the board sets strategy, provides resources to execute that strategy, and holds management accountable for delivering the desired results. In other words, the role of the chief executive and their management team is to execute *the board's agenda*. Again, this perspective had implications for the kind of chief executive who was hired and how the board supported that executive. These chairs were looking for an executive with an excellent record of successful implementation and results, not necessarily an executive known for their strategic vision. These board chairs expected less debate with the chief executive on the relative merits of the strategy and more emphasis on regular progress reports on the execution.

Either perspective can be valid, but we found that if left unresolved, the struggle over who "owns" the agenda setting was one of the factors that led some chief executives to leave their posts in frustration.

Supporting implementation

Whether a board dictated a major change initiative (such as a new strategy) or approved one proposed by the chief executive, few chairs discussed how they supported management in the installation and realization of these organizational shifts.

This is not entirely surprising. Most boards see implementation of new strategies and change initiatives as the domain of chief executives and their management teams. While we support this perspective, we also believe it is incomplete. Our observations over the past decade have revealed that, to maximize the chances of fully realizing the intent of crucial organizational shifts, boards need to stay engaged long after approvals are given. However, many boards struggle to find the proper “altitude” from which to engage with their chief executives on change execution. Our research has identified a set of board mechanics and critical mindsets[3] that help boards avoid either being largely absent during implementation (often experienced as “missing in action”) or getting too involved in execution decisions and details (commonly referred to as “being in the weeds”). We have seen that proper application of these mechanics and mindsets fosters stronger alignment between the board and management on the ultimate intent of the changes, minimizes risks that can thwart successful realization of the changes, and ensures that chief executives and their teams are held accountable for successful execution.

Full disclosure or not

We have one last reflection on a difference that surfaced when comparing comments from chief executives and their board chairs: Most chairs shared that an important element in the level of trust that develops between them and their executives is based on what they perceive as open and transparent communications. Interestingly, many chief executives we interviewed acknowledged that they are not always fully open and transparent with their chairs. They calibrate the timing, detail, and nature of the information they provide. We heard a number of reasons for this strategic sharing,

[3] See “The Board’s Role in Major Change” by Conner Advisory.

including fears that some information might be misinterpreted, that it may trigger an overreaction and subsequent demand for action by the board, or that it would seem to invite the board to focus on details that really are the sole domain of the management team. Regardless of their motivation, we found that chief executives routinely tailor the information they share with their boards—some much more than others.

Given this reality, we have seen board chairs take two actions. First, some chairs have a conversation with their chief executive that acknowledges the chair knows that not all information will be fully shared with them and the board. Second, and most importantly, chairs often insist there should be no surprises. In other words, they expect the chief executive to keep them informed on any external or internal circumstances that could fundamentally change or threaten the mission of the organization.

Recommended practices and exceptions

In Phase I of our research project, we offered a set of recommended practices that emerged from our conversations with chief executives. These practices reflected success patterns that we observed among the leaders in our sample. In this follow-up phase of the research, we were curious to learn how these recommendations held up in the eyes of board chairs. Many of these practices (listed in the table below and described in more detail in the Annex of this report) focused on establishing a strong relationship between the board chair and the chief executive and ensuring supportive board actions.

Table: Recommendations for chief executives and board chairs (Phase I)

Chief executives	Board chairs
• Ensure there is a match between your leadership strengths and the circumstances of the organization you are being considered for. • With your board chair, contract your role, the terms of your relationship, and the expectations for success; reassess on a regular basis. • Declare your priorities and values as well as your needs of support. • Make needed organizational changes as early as possible. • Prioritize your time and energy.	• Ensure a succession plan is in place. • Match organizational circumstances with the prospective leader's predisposition. • Establish a strong working relationship and alignment on roles and expectations with the chief executive; reassess on a regular basis. • Monitor the nature and level of board support; reassess its adequacy and appropriateness on a regular basis. • Ensure the chief executive has a team of competent leaders.

Most of the practices cited in last year's report resonated well with the board chairs, as demonstrated by the numerous examples they shared regarding their relationships with their chief executives, clarification of roles and responsibilities, alignment of expectations, and timely and critical support provided to management, especially in times of stress and change. There were, however, some exceptions when it came to actually enacting those practices.

The first exception that emerged in Phase II was a recommendation that cut across several practices on our initial list. These practices suggested chief executives and board chairs should periodically revisit their understandings and agreements on a) the nature and quality of their relationship, b) expectations around priorities and performance, and c) the adequacy and effectiveness of board support. The early days of a new relationship offer opportunities to surface assumptions and expectations around these critical areas, and many chief executives and board chairs shared examples of how they discussed these topics early on. However, we found little evidence that these areas were reassessed unless a rupture or major issue emerged between the chief executive and their board chair.

Given the volatile nature of the environment within which most NGOs and non-profits currently operate, the risk of not explicitly revisiting these topics (specifically the relationship, board expectations, and board support) from time to time is that the norms established in the past may no longer be appropriate or adequate for the current circumstances. For instance, the pattern and intensity of communications that works well in times of relative stability may be inadequate in times of crisis. Board expectations of the chief executive and the management team that seemed reasonable and achievable at one moment in time may need to be dramatically revised in light of new opportunities or threats. Finally, the nature and level of involvement of the board may need to shift from giving the chief executive plenty of autonomy in making key decisions to becoming actively engaged with them as thinking partners and collaborators. As these examples suggest, neglecting to reassess relationships, expectations, and support can put organizations at a disadvantage when trying to navigate new and challenging circumstances.

A second exception in practice was that the majority of organizations in our sample were not particularly well prepared when they had to replace their chief executive. This often resulted in delays and long periods of uncertainty between chief executives and, subsequently, greater risks of disruption to the organization. As one chair summed up the situation: "*If our chief executive wins the lottery tomorrow and decides to retire (or, God forbid, gets hit by a bus!), we would have to scramble to replace him.*" This would not be an ideal situation for either the board or the organization.

To mitigate these risks, our recommendation for board chairs is twofold. First, place a stronger emphasis on supporting the current leader in the areas that contribute most to their job satisfaction. The cost of replacing a chief executive (and the risks in not getting the selection right) almost always outweighs the cost of supporting the incumbent. Second, ensure that succession is explicitly discussed among the board members and with the chief executive. Insist that contingency plans for succession are sketched out and revisited from time to time for any needed updates.

These exceptions in practice notwithstanding, the insights we gained from the chief executives and board chairs over the past two years have made us even more confident in recommending the practices listed in the preceding table. We encourage the reader to review the Annex for further detail.

OPEN QUESTIONS

Over the past decade, much has been written about the demise of the current model of international aid. Countless conferences have been held to discuss the urgent need to transform the international civil society sector, and significant multilateral efforts have been made to reimagine the sector that largely emerged after WWII.[4,5,6,7] While not all aspirations are the same, most argue for a sector that is local, less paternalistic, and more inclusive and that regains the trust or legitimacy it once enjoyed in previous decades. The recent changes in state-sponsored aid (from the U.S., Germany, and other major donor nations) have only amplified the voices advocating for significant change.[8,9]

In light of these views, we want to acknowledge that most of the participants in our two phases of research were from the Global North. The majority of leaders we spoke with are the products of historically "Northern" educational institutions, governance models, cultures, and leadership

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[4] See, for example, the RINGO Project at ringoproject.org.

[5] See International Civil Society Centre's blog post "Reimagining civil society financing in times of crisis."

[6] See International Civil Society Centre's blog post "The risk of inaction: the case for creating an enabling environment for alternative financing models."

[7] Ramalingam, Ben. "Five shifts that could transform humanitarian work." *The New Humanitarian.* June 29, 2026. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2026/06/29/five-shifts-could-transform-humanitarian-work

[8] Igoe, Michael. "Foreign aid's time of monsters. The old aid is dying. Can the new aid be born?" *Devex*. May 11, 2026. https://www.devex.com/news/devex-pro-insider-foreign-aid-s-time-of-monsters-112023

[9] Kumar, Raj. "The old aid model is dead. Now comes the fight over what replaces it." *Devex.* January 16, 2026. https://www.devex.com/news/the-old-aid-model-is-dead-now-comes-the-fight-over-what-replaces-it-111648

practices. With the continued attention to decolonizing aid as well as the efforts to promote greater localization, many organizations are adapting. For example, organizations are intentionally selecting leaders and board members from the Global South, relocating their global headquarters to the Global South, and adopting flatter, nontraditional operating models. Further study is needed to identify the extent to which the practices we have identified apply or need to be modified to align with these developments.

Another trend worth investigating is the emergence of a younger cohort of leaders as well as a greater percentage of women serving as chief executives and as board members. These leaders bring different perspectives based on when they came of age and their life experiences. One board chair shared that the younger members of his board are not shy about challenging the assumptions of the older members or the ideas of the chief executive. Moreover, chief executives have remarked to us that this new cohort of board members brings different assumptions about their roles, work–life balance, and workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion, to name just a few of the differences that were mentioned.

Related to this generational shift, the sector is in the middle of coming to grips with the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) and cryptocurrencies (crypto) on their advocacy, fundraising, and delivery efforts.[10] Numerous experiments are happening across the sector to better understand how to leverage AI and crypto. Additional research is needed to understand how these disruptive innovations could influence the factors contributing to the success of chief executives in the sector.

Finally, we believe the following two areas deserve further investigation: 1) the impact that different organizational models (e.g., unitary, [con]federation, or movement) have on the practices we have highlighted and 2) the impact of different board models (e.g., representational versus independent boards) on our findings. Although the participants in our research represented a cross-section of organizational and board models, our samples were too small to draw any definitive conclusions.

[10] See International Civil Society Centre's blog post "AI transformation: Where does that leave civil society organisations?"

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>
> **Claudemir da Silva (ICSC)** for his significant effort in compiling and organizing the massive amount of qualitative data that emerged from the interviews.

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ANNEX: ORIGINAL PHASE I RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHIEF EXECUTIVES AND BOARDS

The following is a set of actions that we recommended senior leaders and their boards take to increase the odds that a new chief executive will have a successful tenure. They were based on interviews conducted with chief executives for Phase I of our research project.

For chief executives

- Assess as honestly as possible how well your leadership strengths (skills, experience, and predisposition) **match the needs and circumstances** of the organization you are considering leading. Does the organization primarily need a visionary leader? A transformational change agent? An exceptional operational manager? A compelling policy advocate? An effective fundraiser?
- Proactively **negotiate with your board chair** the terms of your relationship as early as possible in your tenure—what the board expects from you, how your success will be measured, which decisions belong to management and which to the board, etc. Document and share these agreements with the board chair. Schedule periodic meetings with the board chair to revisit the agreements, to discuss specifically the **quality of the working relationship**, and to agree on any issues that need to be addressed.
- **Declare your priorities and values** early and frequently during your tenure. Reinforce the agreements you have reached with the board and that you expect your team to pursue. Minimize the chances for any misinterpretation of what you intend to achieve during your time as chief executive.
- Assess the strength and character of the executive team you inherit and **make needed changes as early as possible** in your tenure. The costs of delaying the replacement of

underperforming or uncooperative members of the executive team will far outweigh the risks of making some personnel mistakes.

- Be vigilant in **prioritizing your time and energy**. Surround yourself with a competent team and strong second-in-command (e.g., deputy, chief of staff) to whom you can **confidently delegate** important responsibilities while you focus on critical priorities.

For boards

- Ensure that adequate **succession planning** is in place. Assume you may have to replace your chief executive with little or no advanced notice.
- Pay particular attention to the **leadership predisposition** a new executive will need given the circumstances in which your organization finds itself (e.g., recovery, transformation, growth, sustaining success). Does a candidate have the experience, mindsets, and emotional profile that best match the challenges they will be expected to address?
- Have a plan for **establishing strong alignment** with the chief executive as early as possible in their tenure. Invest in building and **strengthening the working relationship** with the chief executive. Schedule periodic meetings to specifically discuss the quality of the relationship and to agree on actions to address any gaps that have surfaced in the relationship.
- Be attentive to the **level and nature of support needed** by executive management, whether in executing a new strategy, handling a crisis, making tough decisions, or taking on some specific responsibilities such as representing the organization among key external stakeholders.
- Ensure that the chief executive surrounds him/herself with **a team of competent leaders** and other support mechanisms (e.g., a strong deputy) to navigate the myriad demands with which they will be required to contend.

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