

“What Defines the Most Effective Board Members I Ever Worked With”, by John Pepper *(edited for length)*

Sometime ago, I was asked to write an article for a magazine addressing the question: “What were the qualities of the finest board members with whom you ever worked?”

It would be hard to overstate the value I have seen outstanding board members provide. This makes it important to choose a board carefully. It is also vital that the relationship between the CEO and the board be open and transparent.

Here is what I found:

1. **OWNERSHIP:** Every one of them approached their board membership as if it were their own company for which they were responsible.
2. **PARTNERSHIP:** Their goal was to support the CEO and staff in contributing to sustaining the success of the nonprofit and to honor their responsibility to the community to protect their interests.
3. **INSIGHT:** These were individuals who, when they spoke up, you listened to them closely. What they said was likely to be fresh, significant and never said simply to announce to the boardroom that they were present.
4. **COURAGE:** They showed courage in speaking up in supporting what might be a controversial board motion or, in some cases, to object to it. The first board member who speaks in a board meeting carries more than an average amount of weight. There were many cases when I was CEO when a board member speaking up on a controversial proposal made the day.
5. **HONESTY:** They were willing to have a direct conversation with the CEO, usually privately, to provide their advice on an important issue on which they concluded the CEO was struggling. This is a priceless attribute of a board member. I can recall instances on boards on which I served going up to the CEO after he/she had made a proposal that was not adopted and telling them that I knew they felt strongly about the issue. I urged that he go back to the board and make it crystal-clear how important approval of this was to the future of the company.
6. **EXPERTISE:** While his or her commitment was to the success of the total enterprise, the strongest board members I worked with usually picked one or two areas where they particularly focused.
7. **COLLABORATION:** Lastly, these best board members respected and worked well with other board members. They were not out to show that they were special or that their ideas had to prevail. They were team players even as they maintained their independence.