

The Healthy Chair Check

How would you describe your relationship with your Chair? How much time does it occupy? Are you predominantly happy, angry, sad or scared when you are with them? How do you relate to them? Do you sometimes want to gang up with your senior team against them? Do you think them unnecessarily meddling in detail? Are they controlling or nurturing?

Our attitudes to authority figures are formed in early years, initially in our attachment to our primary caregivers, then our first experience of teachers, that first day at school and then they are reinforced by rules we are given about how to behave when we are about ten. We carry these thoughts and feelings in our heads and bodies and out of awareness react to our Chair or those in authority as though they are these early authority figures, projecting on to them characteristics or attributes that may or may not be theirs. Then of course we respond to them as though they really have these characteristics. This invites the Chair to respond to us as though they are our authority figures and in some existential sense they do have our life and livelihood in their hiring and firing hands. This web of relationships we co-weave often needlessly complicates our already difficult lives as CEOs, takes time away from other things and often leaves us driving away from board meetings wondering how it all happened again.

This critical relationship is complex and can lead to a strong and productive force for good for you and for the organisation. I work with CEOs who are at a loss to understand the nature of their relationship with the chair and why it can create so much tension. Unconsciously they see and feel in their Chairs the mother who abandoned them at 7, the military father trained never to show emotion or the head-teacher who exposed them in front of the school for getting dirty on the playing field.

...and what about the Chair? What is their motivation? There's the sense of giving something back, especially from those who have been good CEOs themselves, of adding value to something, hopefully a passion for the organisation and its aims, the opportunity to network and to learn from others. They may also be meeting their own parental injunctions to Be Good, to Try Hard, to 'give and not to count the cost, to labour and not to seek for any reward'. There is also the shadow side: authority seeking; playing with a better train set than they have in their job; the founding Chair still gripping onto his baby after 40 years when it's clear that it has long since grown up and left home; the ever-so-subtly unstated wish for the knighthood; or at worst the playground of the bully. It is not unknown for Chairs to be less professionally experienced or capable than you are and this situation can lead to the Parent/Child roles being reversed. So how do you have a healthy relationship with the real Chair and not the projected one?

4 ways to understand your Chair better

- 1 write a pen sketch of your Chair, what you thought they were like as a child, identify their strengths, development needs and put yourself in their shoes
- 2 find a way to see them as real adults with needs, histories, thoughts, feelings and behaviour as rich and complex as yours. This will help you to relate to them in a real way and not to the projected mother who humiliated you in public all those years ago
- 3 get to know how they are under pressure; sad, scared or angry and note how they behave
- 4 consider them with Unconditional Positive Regard, respect, acceptance and mindful loving kindness - model it - you might just get it back!

6 ways to understand how you relate to each other

- 1 note any similarities of characteristics with your early authority figures
- 2 identify what they need from you
- 3 be clear about how you can meet their needs
- 4 reflect carefully on what it will feel like for you to meet their needs, is it giving away power, does it feel demeaning or frustrating, what patterns are you acting out from your early years and what are truly based in the reality of now
- 5 develop strategies to protect yourself and get your own needs met
- 6 remember you can't change them only your attitude and behaviour to them

10 practical steps to improve the relationship

- 1 use the Miracle Question. You go to sleep tonight and wake up tomorrow and the relationship is really effective, Adult, productive and supportive. As you get out of bed what's different? As you arrive at work who notices the difference and what is it? As you see the Chair what does s/he notice is different about it? What does the Board notice is the quality of the relationship? Be really specific, body language, feeling, attitude. Now you have seen it, identify how you can live it
- 2 ask them directly why they do it and what they need from the organisation and from you
- 3 communicate your needs too in an Adult way, using your thoughts and feelings,
- 4 be very clear about boundaries of responsibility, verbally and in writing, and have clear, written, transparent, board-agreed responsibilities, accountabilities and levels of delegated authority. If you haven't already use ACEVO's excellent guidelines on Job Description for the Chair
- 5 encourage them to have a role for what the Americans call 'getting, giving or going', networks, profile, money, with key performance indicators
- 6 practise what you are going to say. Imagine your Chair sat on a real chair opposite you - this is powerful, be really aware of what you are thinking before you talk, identify one or more of the core feelings and calmly practise what you want to say - remembering to focus on your breath
- 7 get support. Walking the road between Chair and senior staff is a lonely one. Be really clear about where you are going to get confidential support, a partner, a peer network or a coach (it's inappropriate for it to be your staff or other board members)
- 8 encourage and model learning

be really clear, in writing, about evaluation / appraisal of and with the Chair, make sure that s/he is trained and supported in this and both you and the Chair get into the habit of using our 6 Golden Learning Questions constantly:

- 1 what was good about it?
 - 2 what contributed to that?
 - 3 how do I/we build on it in the future?
 - 4 what was not so good?
 - 5 what contributed to that?
 - 6 what do I/we learn from it for the future?
- 9 be on the board yourself - if your rules of governance allow you to join the board. If not, change the rules!
 - 10 go and be a Chair in another organisation and practise giving its CEO what you want yourself