10 Attributes of a Great Chair

Introduction
There are many attributes which combine to make a terrific Chair. Like all great leaders, it is easy to recognise an effective Chair when you see them, but pinning down what they have in common can be a bit more difficult. The following list highlights the top 10 attributes we think all great Chairs share.

1. Integrity
The person leading the Board of the organisation must be seen to have the highest personal standards with regard to honesty, reliability, and commitment to the role. They must lead by example. There should be no doubt that they can be trusted at all times. They must always do the right thing, and have the right conversations, even if this is difficult. What the Chair says must be in line with what they do, and also what they think and feel. When the Chair acts with integrity both the Board and staff are more likely to respect the Chair, leading to smoother working relationships.

2. Ability to influence others, without dominating
The Chair is responsible for ensuring all Board members are using their own unique skills for the good of the organisation. A good Chair recognises that each and every Board member is there for a reason, and has knowledge, expertise and experience to give. They must ensure all Board members contribute to discussions and the decision making process. The Chair must present the options available to the Board, and clearly state the rationale for any recommendations. However, they must also allow each Board member to express their views, even if they conflict with the view of the Chair. Developing effective communication with Board members as individuals can really help here – knowing their strengths and weaknesses, understanding their perspective and using the most effective influencing style for them. Confidence and sensitivity are important attributes when leading a professional Board.

3. Personal strength
Being a Chair can be a tough job. As the one person with ultimate responsibility for Board and organisational performance, it is easy to worry, take things personally and become burned out. A good Chair gives strength and support to others while being resilient themselves. This requires a strong personality, which must be tempered with the need to get the most out of other Board members, as discussed above. Even the most experienced, effective Board teams face crises from time to time, and the ability of the Chair both to deal with the ‘bad times’, and to bounce back after them is key to the organisation recovering and moving on.

4. Clear vision and passion for the work
The Chair needs to be clear about their vision for the Board, and also to ensure that the Board and senior staff share a clear vision for the organisation. The best Chairs lead the Board in setting the vision and values for the organisation, and ensure this is communicated to staff and other key stakeholders. Even the most seasoned professional will be tested at times, and a passion for the work will help in maintaining commitment when things get tough.

5. Emotional intelligence
This is arguably the most important attribute of any leader – the ability to read people and build effective relationships with them. Relationships among Board members can sometimes become strained. Let’s face it, conflict happens in all teams from time to time, and can in fact be healthy if dealt with properly. An emotionally intelligent Board leader can identify when an element of conflict leads to more effective challenge and more robust decision making, and when it might be detrimental to the Board. A great Chair is an excellent facilitator, who can make everyone feel confident and safe enough to share their views, challenge the views of others, and then reach a joint decision. The emotionally intelligent Chair hears not just what is said, but can also read the other directors to discover what is not being said.
6. **Intellect and experience**
A certain level of intelligence and experience is required to lead Board work, and effectively undertake the key tasks of the Chair role. Research has shown that Boards benefit from having Chairs who have previously served as both a Chief Executive and a Chair. This mixture of experiences allows the Chair to speak the languages of both Board and staff. It also means that the Chair:
- understands the need for having the right people around the table,
- focusing on the right issues,
- doing the right thinking,
- having the right conversations,
- challenging and supporting the Chief Executive in the right way, and
- making the right decisions based on the best information.

7. **Decisiveness**
Great Chairs know what to prioritise, when to take action, and what judgement to make in difficult circumstances. They use the best information to make decisions which balance the needs of all stakeholder groups, and are in the best interests of the company.

8. **Ability to chair meetings**
It may seem obvious, but great Chairs must be able to chair meetings! Most of the work of the Board is done in meetings, and the ability to manage those meetings effectively is key. This includes planning the agenda, ensuring balanced input from all members, ensuring clarity about decisions and actions agreed, and following up to make sure agreed actions are carried out in line with Board decisions.

9. **Coaching skills**
As a leader of the Board, the Chair’s role is to get the best from every Board member and from the Chief Executive. The role of the Chair is to ‘conduct the orchestra’ rather than play the loudest tune. Coaching is a useful way of supporting on-going learning and development of each Board Member, thus creating synergy and ensuring they are contributing as much as they can as an individual.

10. **Courage**
Given the importance of Board work, the nature of decisions needed, and the inevitable tensions between the Board and senior staff, there are times when the Chair needs to make courageous decisions in the best interests of the company, which are not always popular.

**Further Information**
- An Introduction to Board Role Descriptions
- Coaching
- Using NLP in Boardroom Communications

Is this an area of concern for you? Contact Leading Governance for more help.