



# Building a Rock-Solid Board-CEO Partnership: Talking With CEO Virginia Jacko

**A successful organization depends on the partnership between the board and CEO.  
Here are insights from a visionary leader.**

By Doug Eadie

**M**y work with nonprofit organizations has taught me that a solid board-CEO partnership is essential for a nonprofit's stability and growth. And a board-savvy CEO — who knows the governing “business” inside-out and is a passionate advocate of strong board leadership — is key to such a partnership.

Virginia Jacko, president and CEO of the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired ([www.MiamiLighthouse.org](http://www.MiamiLighthouse.org)), is one of the board-savviest CEOs I've ever worked with. An inspiring leader and master of the governing game, she's one of a handful of blind Americans heading a major nonprofit, and her professional attainments light the way for others struggling with disabilities.

Gradually losing her eyesight while serving as director of financial affairs at Purdue University, Virginia relocated to Miami in 2001 to receive rehabilitation training at the Miami Lighthouse. She was subsequently asked to join the Lighthouse board, and after serving as its treasurer, was appointed interim and then permanent CEO of the Lighthouse, which on her watch has grown significantly, launching a number of innovative programs and more than doubling contributions.

I recently talked with Virginia about her governing work at the Lighthouse. Here are highlights from that conversation:

**Doug:** What accounts for your successful partnership with your board?

**Virginia:** I see my board as a precious asset — a fantastic collection of knowledge, expertise, diverse perspectives, networks in the community, access to financial resources, and more. One of my most important jobs as CEO is helping my board realize its governing potential.

That means I've got to function as Chief Board Developer, acquiring in-depth knowledge of what's going on in the field of nonprofit governance and spending at least 25% of my time directly supporting my board. Also, our board chairs have been

key to our success.

**D:** Tell me about them.

**V:** Every one of the chairs I've worked with since becoming CEO has been an outstanding leader, and each has made a unique contribution. My first chair actively helped me cement my working relationship with my new board. My second chair donated money for a consultant to assist the task force we created to update the board's governing role, structure, and processes. My third chair headed that task force while he was still chair-elect and, during his year as chair, made sure the task force recommendations were fully implemented. And my fourth and current chair continues to carry the governing improvement torch, taking the lead in more firmly establishing the board's new committee structure and refining board processes.

**D:** What's your strategy for forging a healthy relationship with your board chairs?

**V:** I've made a point of getting to know them really well early in their tenure — finding out what they wanted to accomplish and the style of communicating they preferred. For example, I provided plenty of talking points and background information for a chair who wanted to represent the Lighthouse publicly. And I focused on face-to-face briefings for a chair who didn't want to wade through documents.

My golden rule: Always make sure the board chair is well prepared to lead board meetings. I make sure the chair is never, ever caught off-guard by information I know about. I'm my chair's early warning system, and I never forget it.

**D:** What change has been most influential in transforming your board?

**V:** Without question, the most important change we've made is adding board committees that correspond to the board's major functions: planning, performance monitoring, external relations, audit, and board self-management. We don't have the kind of narrow “silo” committees that get boards in trouble by inviting

micro-management (such as a personnel or facilities committee).

A tremendous asset for me is having committee chairs take action recommendations to board meetings. They serve as “spear carriers,” which means I don't have to draw on my CEO line of credit to convince the board to act. ■

## Resources

Can Standing Committees Contribute to High-Impact Governing? (Vol. 25, No. 2)

How to Assess and Improve Your Board's Performance (Vol. 24, No. 1)

The Board-Savvy CEO (Vol. 26, No. 2)

Building a Strong Board-Exec Relationship (Vol. 21, No. 4)

These resources are available free at [www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members). Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Board Governance ([www.snpo.org/lino](http://www.snpo.org/lino)).

### Live Webinar: Building a Rock-Solid Partnership With Your Board (June 10, 1-2:30pm EDT):

Building and maintaining a rock-solid board-CEO partnership that is close, positive, and enduring is a critical step toward the kind of high-impact governing capacity that the times demand. In this course, Doug Eadie and Virginia Jacko will provide participants with detailed, practical, thoroughly-tested guidance for building such a partnership.

Learn more at: <http://www.snpo.org/courses/eadie0610.php>

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