

I Have a Confession to Make

By Kathleen Burke Barrett, CFRE, CEO, St. Joseph's Villa

Let's start by getting this right out on the table. I have a split personality. What you don't know, is you probably do too.

I have been involved in non-profits for over 30 years. Yes, that's right—when we used electric typewriters, had no fax machines and we didn't carry cell phones or computers in our pockets. Heaven knows, I wouldn't want to go back to those days. I like the changes in our work and that the basic missions we serve remain the same.

The part of the business that hasn't changed is working with people and that is the best part. With all of the wonderful parts of meeting people and forming new relationships, there are also challenges and this is where my split-personality comes in.

In the course of my career and volunteering I have served on and chaired numerous non-profit boards. As CEO and Executive Director of large and small non-profits I have worked with hundreds of board members and quite a few chairpersons. My chairs have been as different as the missions of the organizations. As I was jotting down some names of my previous chairs, I looked at the list and it was like a litter of kittens. All were different. Some men, some women; some extroverts, some introverts. Some wanted to be "hands-off" others wanted to do the CEO job. All cared about the work of the non-profit they were serving but most had no clear idea what was expected of them as Chair of the Board. In some instances, those who thought they had an idea of their role did not jive with what the CEO believed. This can lead to confusion and frustration.

Early in my career I was guilty of this. I reported to the board chair so I didn't want to rock the boat by "telling" them what to do. I reported to that person. I wanted to keep them happy. I lacked the confidence to do the things necessary to prepare that chair for their term of office and in doing so I believe I caused the organization to suffer. Some chair terms were one-year or two-year so that took a lot orientation time. I kept telling myself the time spent was well worth it.

When I became a board chair I started demanding (in a nice way, of course) that the CEO meet with me so we could discuss expectations. I could listen to their desired outcome from the relationship and be prepared to deliver those outcomes.

As time went on I became profoundly aware of the difference between a CEO and a board chair of an organization. Both of these positions are vital but one is **governance** and the other is **management**. It is explosive when they don't jive.

Having a split personality (being a chair and a CEO) taught me many lessons that in the second stage of my non-profit life and has helped me immensely. I can see how to best

help from both sides of the boardroom table and the organization is the winner. At the end of the year the chair and board members are happy and celebrate their achievements. The partnership between the CEO/Chair can be wonderful. When the relationship is strong, the non-profit benefits from twice as much talent at the top. Just know it doesn't happen on its own.

This October 2-4 the Millwood Institute will be held at the historic Carter Hall Conference Center in Millwood, VA. This conference is for CEOs and their board chairs only and space is limited. There will be outstanding speakers, time to get to know each other better and make plans for next year at your organization. This Institute was held for the first time last year and received rave reviews. All agreed that the time spent together made them more effective in their positions and they learned so much from those attending. Let me also add there was a beautiful atmosphere, wonderful home cooking and cocktail hour each evening!

Go to MillwoodInstitute.org for more information. I hope to see you there in October to enjoy autumn in the mountains and learn a thing or two. I would love to meet you. (Oh, did I mention s'mores by the fire?)