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**General Governance Training  
Case Study Review #2  
GCSA Conference – Tuesday, March 6, 2018**

**Can Oil and Water Mix?**

- The chief executive and the board chair of Georgia Stars Academy Charter (GSAC) could not have been more different in their leadership styles. Behind their backs, staff and board members referred to them as “the lion and the lamb” and “oil and water.” And yet, throughout their careers, each had been a successful leader in more than one organization, using exactly the individual styles they were now exhibiting.
- A little more than two years ago, when the original chief executive resigned, the board and staff of GSAC reassessed the organization’s needs and identified some key areas for organizational change. Before beginning a search for a chief executive who could implement the change, the board identified qualities the new chief executive should possess: good contacts with the community being served, an ability to create awareness about the school, excellent instructional leadership skills, a focus on results, a commitment to the cause, and an ability to “get things done.” When board members interviewed Elizabeth Duncan, they thought she was perfect for the job.
- Ms. Duncan possessed excellent qualifications, was enthusiastic about the organization, and was eager to get to work. Many board members, especially the newer ones, thought her hard-charging style would be good for the school in the long run, while acknowledging that it might take some getting used to at first. Everyone recognized that there would be an adjustment period, but hoped it wouldn’t take too long for the new chief executive, the long-time board chair, and board members to figure out the best way to work together to achieve common goals.
- During her first year on the job, Elizabeth was a whirlwind of energy and enthusiasm. The school flourished and met academic and operational targets in the state frameworks. Although Elizabeth could be intimidating and often made decisions without involving senior staff, most of her staff respected her, and program evaluations showed the organization was meeting objectives and staying within budget. In fact, Elizabeth proved to be a great fundraiser and managed to increase the scope of many programs as a result of bringing funds into the school. From Elizabeth’s perspective, these results were entirely due to her efforts and those of her hardworking staff. In her opinion, the board contributed little or nothing to the newfound success of the school. Elizabeth thought Ricardo Lopez, the board chair, and other board members took too long to make decisions, and sometimes meddled in day-to-day operations. She believed the board should stick to fundraising and leave all other operations and decisions to the school leadership team.
- In contrast to Elizabeth’s style, Ricardo preferred to lead by getting everyone involved. In his seven years as board chair, he had promoted collaboration as a way to keep people engaged. This style fostered a diversity of opinions, making everyone feel welcome and appreciated, and giving everyone a chance to be heard. Long-time board members had become accustomed to this



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leadership style and, although they recognized that it added time to board meetings, they thought it was worthwhile. While granting that these qualitative outcomes were harder to measure than quantitative results, Ricardo believed that feelings of inclusiveness were the “glue” that kept volunteers on the board and the “grease” that enabled them to work together effectively on behalf of the school. He couldn’t understand why Elizabeth seemed to make decisions without exploring options or listening to board members’ opinions. He worried that this approach might leave board members feeling disengaged, and that they might leave the board. If several left at once, Ricardo thought GSAC would have a much harder time achieving its mission.

- Two years into Elizabeth’s tenure, GSAC was meeting most of its goals. However, three board members were planning to resign because they felt underutilized, and many others had expressed the opinion that the organization could be doing exceptional work if the board and staff had a more collaborative relationship. What could the board do to foster a more constructive partnership between the chief executive officer and the board chair? How would such a partnership benefit GSAC?

Analysis Questions –

1. What is the most important issue in this case study?
2. In addition to the primary issue, what other issues may need to be addressed?
3. What are the steps that you would take to resolve these issues?
4. What behavior(s) will your board change after reviewing this case study?