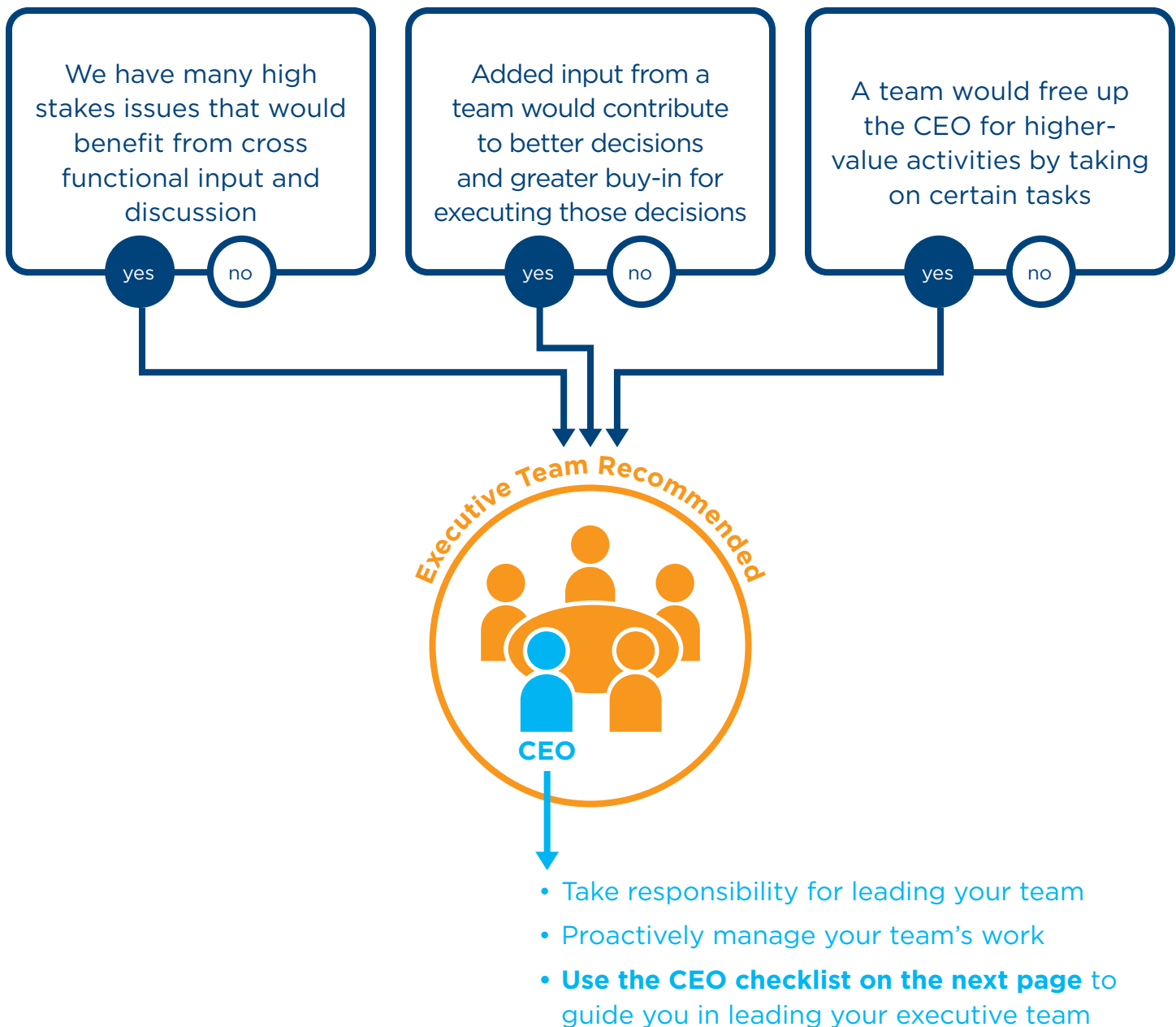# CEO Management of the Executive Team

Not all organizations need a group of senior leaders to come together to collaborate on leading the organization. It is the responsibility of the CEO to determine whether or not an executive team is needed, and, if it is, to form the team that is best suited to the organization's needs.

Is an executive team needed?

We have many high stakes issues that would benefit from cross functional input and discussion

yes   no

Added input from a team would contribute to better decisions and greater buy-in for executing those decisions

yes   no

A team would free up the CEO for higher-value activities by taking on certain tasks

yes   no

Executive Team Recommended

CEO

- Take responsibility for leading your team
- Proactively manage your team's work
- **Use the CEO checklist on the next page** to guide you in leading your executive team

CEO Checklist for Managing Executive Teams

In our research, every high performing team we identified was led by a CEO who intentionally managed the team. This checklist highlights a number of steps CEOs can take to more effectively lead their executive teams. Use it to assess your approach to executive team management and where it might need improvement.

1. Leading the team and individuals

Managing the team

☐ I have defined (or worked with my team to define) and communicated the work of the team.

☐ I have determined who should be on the team and if two teams are needed.[1]

☐ I maintain ownership over the team meeting agendas and process.

Leading the team

☐ I have communicated my decision-making style and preferences to the team.

☐ I am clear with my expectations of what I want from the team (making a decision, providing input, etc.).

☐ I demonstrate desired behaviors (lead by example).

☐ I reward (address) appropriate (inappropriate) team behaviors.

☐ I reward (address) appropriate (inappropriate) individual behaviors.

☐ I draw out and amplify diverse and underrepresented points of view.

☐ I consider differential impacts of decisions on people of color.

☐ I understand and self-correct my unconscious biases.

Developing the team and individuals

☐ I have identified competencies that individual team members need to develop and have developed a plan with each individual to help them improve.

☐ I incorporate feedback for individuals about their team performance in their annual reviews.

☐ I manage out team detractors that don't improve with feedback.

2. Delegating, but not abdicating, some team management tasks

☐ I have clearly communicated responsibilities and expectations to any deputy (e.g., COO, chief of staff, or strong executive assistant) I have to manage some team processes (e.g., meeting follow up).

☐ I have clearly communicated responsibilities and expectations to any specific leaders to whom I have delegated to lead certain topics.

3. Strengthening your capabilities

☐ I have identified ways in which I need to strengthen my capabilities to lead the team.

☐ I have identified ways I can get help (e.g., other CEOs, board members, coaches, team members, etc.).

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1 Many larger nonprofits have two leadership teams. See team composition guidance, beginning on page 14.

CEO Team Management:
Peer Perspectives

It's important for any nonprofit CEO to maximize executive team effectiveness in service of the organization's impact. Yet, inspiring high performance of the executive team isn't easy. We spoke to three CEOs: Kirstin Chernawsky of Erie Neighborhood House, Eric Robbins of the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta, and Dorri McWhorter of YWCA Metropolitan Chicago, to learn how they approach leading their teams and which efforts have been particularly powerful.

Why did you take action to improve your team's effectiveness?

"We started on a project to improve our effectiveness when I was a year into my tenure as executive director," said Erie Neighborhood House's Chernawsky. "I inherited our leadership team—not just the employees but also the team's culture and way of doing things—from the former ED, and there hadn't been an opportunity for us as a new group to shape our norms and expectations. We had also realized that we did not have a common understanding of the role of the leadership team within our agency or what that meant for each of us individually. So, for both of those reasons, I saw a need to do that work with the team so that we could hold one another accountable. Ultimately, codifying the work of our team, meeting and communication processes, and expected team behaviors really created a common language, which is incredibly important when you think about the challenges and nuance that can come with communication, period."

How do you define your role in the context of the team's work?

"When a big decision comes up, we identify whether I am the decision maker, if it is someone else on the leadership team, or if it is the leadership team as a whole who is the ultimate decider," Chernawsky said. "If it's the latter, we also decide how the decision will be made. Does it have to be consensus? Does it have to be a majority vote? If it is a majority vote, I get one vote like everyone else," she added. "If I am in the dissenting minority, I commit to upholding the decision made by our team. This is one of our agreed-upon behavioral norms, and I think that is really powerful. It also means that when I do say that I need to be the final decision maker on something, the team respects and appreciates that."

How do you delegate, but not abdicate, some team management tasks?

Executive team leaders inevitably have long to-do lists, limited time, and pressing priorities outside of their work as part of the executive team. Yet they may feel compelled to take on tasks that might be better supported by others. To alleviate the pressure of "taking it all on," Robbins of the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta enlists the help of his chief of staff to draft agendas and do follow up on critical decisions that need to be made. "Our chief of staff compiles suggested agenda items submitted by team members, we discuss them, and I decide if they all belong on the final meeting agenda and what specific amount of time is needed for those items," Robbins said. "Our chief of staff also tracks and records follow-up items during meetings and sends reminders to ensure that everyone who said they would do something at a previous meeting actually completes their tasks. We then start our next meeting by asking about where we are with those items."

How have you identified and met the needs of your team?

"Doing this work to develop these executive team tools has helped me better understand what the team needs from me, and structure is one of those things," said McWhorter, the CEO of YWCA Metropolitan Chicago. "These tools have created structure for our meetings, organizational priorities, the work of our team, and behavioral norms. We developed templates in all of these areas, and our executive team members are already using these with their own teams. We're also developing another template to document and track follow-up items. As a result, we are now more focused in how we work together."