

Should We Form a Board Committee?



For many voluntary organizations, committees are one of the ways important works gets done. They are seen as a way to involve people, share the work, and ensure that different perspectives are incorporated. Another key advantage of committees is that a small group can explore an issue in some detail, gain some expertise.

There can be some disadvantages too. Committee meetings on top of board meetings is often one of the causes of “burn out” of volunteer directors and the prospect of many meetings makes it hard to recruit people to the Board in the first place. Committees can also waste valuable volunteer and staff time whenever their work is subject to a thorough rehashing by the board itself. There is also a lot of experience in the voluntary sector with committees that always have the same people always on them, and Committees that exist on paper but seldom or never meet.

We offer this advice to Boards of Directors:

- Do not automatically set up a board committee. Consider whether the issue is really a governance or operational issue. There may not be a clear answer, but the question is a good one anyway. If it is the latter, maybe a committee that gives advice to the Executive Director rather than reporting directly to the Board may be better.
- Consider assigning a task to one person rather than to a group, especially if the job is not a big one and it has to come back to the Board anyway. It is so easy to coordinate a meeting with yourself, or for one person to pick up the phone to consult with someone else.
- Be clear whether the Committee is “ad hoc” (temporary) or if it is to be a standing committee. If it is to be temporary, give it a short life. People may be more inclined to want to participate in an ad-hoc committee than a standing committee.
- If the Board is setting up a group to look at an issue, give the Committee clear direction and a time frame for its work. It may seem more democratic to let people determine their own mandate but a lack of clarity can make it difficult to recruit committee members or determine who else needs to be consulted. (Would you agree to serve on a Committee when the task is not clear? Would you know what outside expertise you need?) A “team” with a specific task

and time frame may be able to perform at a higher level than a group facing a potentially enormous task and unclear expectations.

- Focus your Committee work on areas where the Board needs to do governance work. Boards should have a **Recruitment or Nominating Committee** and perhaps a **Policy Committee**. If your Board is going to be more heavily involved than staff in fundraising, you will certainly need a **Fundraising Committee**. If your Board is going to provide the leadership on your organization's role in public advocacy, an **Advocacy Committee** of the Board may also be necessary.
- If you have, or are considering setting up, an **Executive Committee**, the Board as a whole should to decide how much power it will have to make decisions between Board meetings and to direct staff. The Executive Committee needs to keep the whole board in view and it is desirable that it have responsibility for planning board meetings and attending to effective governance overall.
- Think *carefully* about whether to set up a **Personnel Committee**. Of all committees, none is a more likely to second guess the Executive Director and take on a micro-managing role. You might consider instead a HR Policy Committee as an ad-hoc group to develop personnel policies. You could also consider an Executive Director Evaluation Team to work with the ED to establish evaluation criteria and methods and conduct an evaluation of the ED's performance. If you have directors interested in being on a standing Personnel Committee, especially individuals with HR experience, consider establishing an operational committee that exists to advise the ED on personnel practices.
- Think *twice* about a Finance Committee. Next to a Board Personnel Committee, Finance Committees are the second most slippery slope to micro-management. Instead, you might consider, as ad hoc committees, a Financial Policy Committee or a Budget Committee.
- Be clear as a Board, and be clear with the ED and all staff, what authority, *if any*, a director has as a member of a committee. Are they to be involved on behalf of the Board or are they there as a volunteer because of their interest or expertise?