



## DO WE NEED COMMITTEES?

Determining an effective structure for the board is no longer as straightforward as it used to be. The traditional board with numerous committees today is only one of the options. Many boards are looking for more flexible ways of managing the workload while adjusting to the board's evolving needs. Here are some alternatives for delegating — or not delegating — various tasks to specific committees.

### **Role of a committee**

Committees can be a practical way to structure and manage the board's work. Sometimes a smaller group can be more focused and efficient in dealing with issues than the full board. A committee is created to provide counseling and advice for the board or to handle a task that belongs in the board's agenda. Its recommendations need to be approved by the board, but the board is not obligated to go with committee suggestions. Committees are more effective when their charter and scope of work is clearly defined by the board.

### **Traditional committee structure**

Most boards consider committees an essential part of the board structure. Traditionally the bylaws define the standing committees and their roles. To be more flexible, the bylaws could authorize the board to form committees as necessary and allow policies to define the details. According to a BoardSource survey, the most common standing committees are executive, finance, and development. In addition, boards can form ad hoc committees or task forces that are formed to carry out a specific task. These also need a job description.

### **Qualities of an effective committee**

A streamlined committee structure makes board work easier. Involving board members in committee activities is a direct way of taking advantage of everybody's special skills and expertise. An effective committee has

- A clear job description and defined goals
- A chair who is able to involve all members in the committee work
- Members who are committed and willing to spend the needed time to accomplish their tasks
- A sense of being part of the full board and not working in isolation

- An understanding of time constraints and deadlines
- An understanding that it does not make decisions; rather it advises and recommends
- An evaluation process to assess its own achievements

### **Task forces or ad hoc committees**

Some boards do not form any standing committees, rather a need is identified, and a task force or an ad hoc committee is formed to carry out the necessary charge. Each task force is unique, so the answers to questions like How often to meet, Who should serve, How big the group should be, will vary. Task forces allow the board to concentrate only on pressing issues and avoid wasting board members' time on activities that are not of strategic importance. Examples of these work groups would be a bylaws task force or a search committee.

### **Zero-based committee structure**

To push efficiency even further, some boards start each year with a clean slate. All committees are abolished automatically and only the ones that are still needed will be re-created. An evaluation process allows the board to reassess the composition of the committee and redirect the focus of the working group if necessary. Benefits of this approach:

- Stagnation can be avoided. The board is flexible and future-oriented.
- Unnecessary committees will be of the past.
- Leadership opportunities are more frequent.
- Leadership changes are not threatening.

### **Outsiders as committee members**

Very infrequently does a board possess all the necessary skills and expertise. Some organizations choose to invite outsiders with specific contacts and knowledge to serve on committees or task forces. Committee members do not have the same liabilities and pressures as full-fledged board members. It is an excellent way to bring new talents and perspectives to the board. It is an excellent way for busy professionals to serve an organization of their choice. Other benefits include: No need to increase the board size; former board members can stay active as committee members; and future board members can be cultivated into board service.

### **No committees at all**

Small and particularly cohesive boards may need no committees at all. Board members manage the workload together as a committee of the whole or delegate tasks to individual board members. This requires effective leadership and commitment from every member.

### **References**

*Transforming Board Structure: Strategies for Committees and Task Forces*

*Nonprofit Board Answer Book*

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