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ARE COMMITTEES NEEDED?

Determining an effective board structure is no longer as straightforward as it used to be. Today, a traditional board with numerous committees 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 to 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 board as a whole. A committee can be created to provide counseling and advice to the board. While the committee submits its recommendations for the board's approval, 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 board structure. Traditionally, the organization's bylaws define the board's standing committees and their roles. A more flexible approach may be a statement in the bylaws that committees can be formed on an as-needed basis and then board policies define the details. According to a BoardSource survey, the most common standing committees are executive, finance, development, and planning committees. 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 the work of the board 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; and
- 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 will vary to questions like: How often should it meet? Who should serve on the task force? How big should the group be? Task forces allow a board to concentrate only on pressing issues and help it avoid wasting time on activities that are not of strategic importance. If a task force has done its job well, the board can

proceed to make wiser decisions. Examples of these work groups include 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 those that are still needed are re-instated. An evaluation process allows a board to reassess the composition of a 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.
- 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 a board and for busy professionals to serve an organization of their choice. Other benefits include: The board gets the work done without having to increase its 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

Robert C. Andringa and Ted W. Engstrom, [Nonprofit Board Answer Book](#) (BoardSource 2001).

Marla J. Bobowick, Sandra R. Hughes, and Berit M. Lakey, [Transforming Board Structure: Strategies for Committees and Task Forces](#) (BoardSource 2001).