



FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT®  
FOR HEALTHY LIVING  
FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

## TERM LIMITS HELP GUARD AGAINST STAGNATION

Rotation is a healthy and natural way of providing change and necessary transformation for a board. Bringing in new board members on a regular basis helps keep away stagnation and provides the board opportunities for renewal. Each board should establish its own system for determining terms limits as defined in its bylaws.

### COMMON TERM LIMITATION

According to a BoardSource survey, nearly three quarters of the respondents reported using three year terms. Those who used limits, on average, had a maximum of two terms. A staggered term system allows a certain number of new members to be chosen each year, preventing no more than one half (preferably one third) of the terms from expiring at the same time. Without any term limits, some board members may serve 20-30 years on one board. Not without controversy is having upper-age limits, for instance, a mandatory retirement at age 70.

### ADVANTAGES OF TERM LIMITS

Many boards find that setting term limits can be beneficial. The following are some advantages of a term limit policy:

- The board has the possibility of working with active community members who can devote only a few years to board service.
- Bringing diversity onto the board is easier.
- The board has a built-in balance of continuity and turnover.
- Passive, ineffective, or troublesome board members can be more easily rotated off.
- Board members experience a better rotation of committee assignments.
- A regular infusion of fresh ideas and new perspectives is brought onto the board.
- The board gains a regular awareness and pays attention to the changing group dynamics.
- Limits present an opportunity for the board and the retiring board member to reassess a mutual willingness to continue working together with the possibility of enlarging the circle of committed supporters by keeping retired board members involved.

### DISADVANTAGES OF TERM LIMITS

The downside to having terms limits can mean:

- the loss of expertise and organizational memory;
- the board spends more time dedicated to recruitment and orientation; and
- additional efforts are needed to keep the group cohesive.

## **DISADVANTAGES OF NOT HAVING TERM LIMITS**

Boards without a term limit policy can experience:

- stagnation if no change occurs among the board members;
- perpetual concentration of power within a small group;
- intimidation of the occasional new member;
- tiredness, boredom, and loss of commitment by the board; and
- loss of connection to the constituency due to a change in demographics or
- environmental factors

## **WHEN A BOARD MEMBER LEAVES**

But what to do when a board member leaves? The following are suggestions for preparing for a replacement while keeping an interested member as a useful volunteer and supporter.

- Make sure the governance committee is prepared in advance with a fresh list of new candidates.
- Regularly conduct exit interviews. These are excellent occasions for the governance committee to get feedback from retiring board members.
- Create guidelines for emeritus status for truly outstanding board members.
- Be inventive in finding other ways to keep productive members attached to the organization (committee assignments, ad hoc task forces, advisory committees, fundraising activities, volunteer activities).
- Require a sabbatical year after the last term to allow the leaving board member to look back and reassess his or her interest in the organization before asking for reappointment.
- Keep in touch with old board members; they are excellent ambassadors for the organization.

## **REFERENCES**

- Robert C. Andringa and Ted W. Engstrom, [\*Nonprofit Board Answer Book\*](#) (BoardSource 2001).
- G. Roger Schoenhals, "[\*The Case for Term Limits for Board Members\*](#)" *Trusteeship* (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges March/April 1999).
- D. Benson Tesdahl, [\*The Nonprofit Board's Guide to Bylaws\*](#) (BoardSource 2003).