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Board Committees

Traditionally board committees have been organized around organizational functions, such as personnel, marketing, fund development, programs, finance, etc. This practice tends to blur the line between staff and board work, and create committee work that is operational rather than strategic.

This can be a burden to the staff members who support the committee, to the extent that the committee develops an agenda that takes the staff from more important work. It can also be frustrating to some trustees who find themselves asked to attend meetings that do not seem especially important.

Board committees should be organized around strategic priorities, not organizational functions. The board must focus its committee work on what is most important, given the organization's strategic goals.

Standing Committees

Some standing committees always have important work to do. These are the committees that deal with the board's basic governing and fiduciary responsibilities.

- Executive Committee – comprised of the officers and perhaps other board members, this committee advises the executive director on a regular basis, and may act on behalf of the board between board meetings.
- Finance Committee – provides financial oversight of the entire operation; assures the board that everything is in order. In addition to the Finance Committee, a board may also have an Investment Committee and an Audit Committee.
- Board Governance Committee – responsible for ensuring that the board is functional well and meeting its responsibilities. This includes not only recruitment and orientation of new members, but also developing opportunities for board performance improvement.

Other standing committees may, or may not have strategically important work to do.

> *No single committee structure will suit every board, for all time…. A board should be organized, to the fullest extent possible, in light of institutional strategy, not in light of organizational structure.*
>
> Richard Chait, et al, *Improving the Performance of Governing Boards* (1996)

Aligning the Committees to the Strategic Goals

> *The key to building a committee structure that works and that enhances the board's overall productivity and sense of accomplishment is a willingness to start from scratch each year with every committee.*
>
> Maureen K. Robinson, *Nonprofit Boards That Work: The End of One-Size-Fits-All Governance* (2001)

- Step 1: The board as a whole should have a strategic agenda for the year. Fists ask: what are the most important things that the organization needs to accomplish this year, given its long range goals? Then ask: what are the most important things for the board to accomplish this year to support the organization?
- Step 2: Determine what committees have the most strategically important work to do this year. Some committees always have important work, in order to carry out the board's basic governing and fiduciary responsibilities. These typically include executive, finance and audit committees. Some customary committees may not be important this year, and other *ad hoc* committees may be required, depending on the board's strategic agenda.
- Step 3: Committee agendas should derive from the board's annual agenda. That is, each committee should ask itself: what do we need to accomplish this year in order to support the board's strategic goals?

- In general, assign trustees to a committee based on their expertise and interests relevant to the work of the committee for the year. Reassign trustees as the work changes to give them variety and exposure to other aspects of the organization.
- Although one of the strategically important committees is likely to be the Development Committee, it should be clear that *all* trustees have roles to play in development. (See below for an alternative approach to development.)
- Stay aligned to the evolving reality. If opportunities or barriers appear that cause a shift in strategies for the organization, committees may have to change as well.

Task Forces and ad hoc *Committees*

Consider using task forces or *ad hoc* committees, instead of standing committees, to accomplish something very important and very specific over a limited period of time.

The advantage of using a task force is that it breaks down a large undertaking into smaller chunks, making it easier for board members to understand exactly what needs to be done and to commit the time to do it. It should be clear how the task will contribute to the overall strategic success of the organization, and why the task needs to be accomplished at this point in time. This will give the board members a sense of urgency in getting the job done, and a feeling of satisfaction in making a tangible contribution to the institution's success.

An Example: Task Forces instead of a Development Committee

Boards are responsible for the overall financial health of a nonprofit. This fiduciary responsibility includes fundraising. This function is often managed by the Development Committee; however; the system has numerous flaws. First is getting members to volunteer to serve on the committee. Second is getting them to move from talk to action.

Kim Klein, in "How to Get Your Board to Raise Money – *Plan X*" (Grassroots Fundraising Journal, April 2002) suggests two options for breaking down the development function so that board members have an easier time understanding what needs to be done and making a commitment. Since fundraising is the responsibility of the entire board, Klein's methods give ways for all board members to participate.

The first option is to go from one committee to four:

- The Acquisition Committee, which is responsible for direct mail, special events, speaking engagements – the ways in which the organization engages individuals who have not given before.
- The Retention Committee, which takes responsibility for the newsletter, database, annual appeals – activities designed to get initial donors to renew their commitment.
- The Upgrade Committee, which identifies donors who could make large gifts and works with the top 10% to get them to increase their giving.
- The Oversight Committee, made up of a member from each of the other committees, to ensure that efforts are coordinated.

The second option breaks the work down by the calendar. Klien gives this example:

- January 5 – March 1: Membership Drive
- March 15 – April 15: Membership Renewal Campaign
- May 1 – August 1: House Parties
- September 10 – October 30: Major Donor Campaign
- November 10 – December 15: Year End Wrap-Up

In each of these options board members do not have to sign up for everything, but they have to sign up for something. Their commitment can be tailored to their own interest and talent, as well as their time availability.

Of course, there may be other ways to break down the development function, and the same applies to other organizational functions. You need not abandon the traditional committee structure overnight. You can start by making greater use of task forces, and eventually it may become evident that there is no need for some of the standing committees.