

ARE YOUR BOARD COMMITTEES WORKING WELL?

Perhaps it's time to revisit your board structure.

No board's committee structure should be set in stone. Every board should pay close attention to the needs of the board and the organization and make sure its work groups are meeting those needs. Frequently reevaluating your board's committee structure and keeping it flexible allows your board to address structural issues as they occur or even before they start.

In this resource, we suggest some questions you might ask the board to determine if your board structure is working, as well as some guidance on how to structure your board.

ARE YOUR BOARD COMMITTEES WORKING WELL?

1. Do your board members feel their participation in committees provides them with a way to contribute to the board's work and use their expertise that regular meetings do not?
2. Are committee assignments distributed evenly across the board so that every member has a chance to be involved in committee work?
3. Do your board committees foster, rather than hinder, board-staff interaction and cooperation and deepen the board's understanding of the issues that have an impact on the life of your organization?
4. Do all of your work groups have an objective? A life span?
5. Are any of your board members confused about your committees' roles?
6. Are any of your committees duplicating another committee's work or the staff's work?
7. Has a standing committee that had important work to do in the past now completed its objective and taken on work that may not have been sanctioned by the board to occupy its time?
8. Does your board have so many committees that your board members are being stretched thin and having to attend too many meetings?
9. Are there committees that are too large or too small to be effective?
10. Are there standing committees that could be turned into task forces with a specific objective to be accomplished within a specific time frame?
11. Are your board committees focused on policy and strategic work? Or are they involved in operations, which is usually the staff's responsibility?
12. If you have an executive committee, are all board members comfortable with the role it is playing? Does anyone feel the committee is acting in place of the board?



ZERO-BASED COMMITTEE STRUCTURE

To prevent their board committee structures from becoming cumbersome, some boards use a zero-based committee structure. This works well because it forces boards to constantly reevaluate their work groups. Here's how it works:

1. **The board starts each year (or every two years) with a clean slate of NO committees.**
2. **At the beginning of the year, the board determines its organizational strategy and priorities.** The board then establishes standing committees and task forces based on its current needs. These groups are formed with the understanding that the group will disband once its objective is met or when the board decides the group should disband at its next annual review of committees.

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KEEP IT SIMPLE; KEEP IT FLEXIBLE

The easiest way to keep the committee structure simple and flexible is to limit the number of standing committees to the bare minimum and to supplement these with a few less permanent work groups.

- **Make sure each committee has a significant amount of ongoing and important work to do.** If a committee does not have enough work to do, it should be disbanded.
- **For short-term or special projects, rely on task forces, but create them with care.** Make sure they relate to the organization's mission, strategy, and priorities; have a reporting structure; have no liability issues; and the work cannot easily be handled by one board member working with staff.
- **Keep the committee structure out of the bylaws,** except for the description of the executive committee, if you have one. Instead, include a phrase in the bylaws that says the board may establish and disband committees as needed to support its work.
- **Give each work group an objective.** The purpose of each work group should be explained in writing. Each charter should explain its role, what it is responsible for achieving, and to whom it is accountable. The full board should agree on the objective.
- **Lay some ground rules** and determine lines of communication on how committees will work with the board.