

# Ask Our Consultants

# BOARD COMMITTEES

OUR BOARD COMMITTEES HAVE NO GROUND RULES INDICATING HOW THEY SHOULD WORK AND COMMUNICATE WITH THE FULL BOARD. AS A RESULT, THEY WORK AUTONOMOUSLY AND COMMUNICATE WITH THE BOARD IN DIFFERING WAYS. ARE THERE BEST PRACTICES THAT MIGHT HELP US?

Yes! Many boards use committees effectively, but others do not, often squandering board members' time and energy.

In general, committees are delegated bodies charged with accomplishing certain work between board meetings and bringing information or recommendations to the full board at a designated time. As a best practice, the full board should engage in generative and strategic thinking about the use of board committees for their organization. Once a board has determined if there is a real need and purpose for establishing a particular board committee, it can develop a global organizational protocol for committees.

Another term for a committee "job description" is a committee "charge" or "charter" — in essence, a protocol. Establishing a protocol is crucial to clarifying the common expectations for a committee's work methodology and necessary outcomes (work product). A committee protocol consists of generic written procedures for how each committee will work. Dedicating 15-20 minutes annually on a meeting agenda for discussion on committee protocol can yield positive results.

Here are nine questions that board members can reflect upon in advance and then discuss at that meeting: \*

1. What should be the size of each committee? Should it be standardized or customized due to the nature of the committee?
2. How will the intent of the committee be determined? For example, is it a standing committee or an ad hoc committee or task force charged with the goal of accomplishing a specific task or tasks? And, if so, what will be the duration of the committee?
3. What will be the process for determining who will serve on each committee? Will a certain expertise or perhaps a certain length of board tenure be required for service on a particular committee?
4. Will the committee be required to have a staff person and, if so, which staff position is the most logical?
5. How shall the committee chair be named and oriented to his/her role? What are his/her specific functions?
6. How shall the committee report to the board? In written form in advance of the meeting for prior review? If so, what format should committee reports take? Or, if it is to be verbal, will there be back-up information such as committee minutes for archival purposes? And remember, not all boards may have something to report at every meeting.
7. Should committee reports be part of the consent agenda?
8. How shall the committee "team" be instructed to work together — are there communication guidelines the members should agree to adopt?
9. How and when should each committee and its members be evaluated for effectiveness?

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Once there is consensus, a “Committee Responsibility” document that includes all of the above information can be used as a benchmark for future committee monitoring and evaluation. This will ensure that committees have purposes that service the mission of the organization and that the time and talent of those who participate on committees is appropriately honored.

\* Some of these issues, such as the process for selecting committee chairs, may be outlined in your organization’s bylaws. Be sure to check them.

*Resource: [Transforming Board Structure: Strategies for Committees and Task Forces](#)*