



Advantages and Potential Disadvantages of Nonprofit Board Committees

Over the past few decades, opinions on the use of committees have changed back and forth from favoring them to suggesting they not be used at all. One Board model, Policy Governance®, asserts that no, or very few, committees be used. In contrast, the major feature of the policy governing ("traditional") model of governance is regular use of committees. Another consideration is what committees to use, if they are used. Yet another consideration is how long a committee would exist, for example, permanent or temporary use.

Advantages of Committees

Advantages of the use of committees, when each is designed and used well, can include that:

1. They efficiently match the most appropriate Board resources to each of the most important priorities of the nonprofit (for example, match members with financial skills to financial priorities and fundraising skills to fundraising), rather than inefficiently matching all Board resources on all priorities at the same time.
2. Collectively, committees can more fully engage all of the Board members when each member feels challenged and fully utilized on an appropriate committee. This is compared to trying to engage all Board members on the nature of the current topic on the agenda in a Board meeting.
3. Similar to the above point, if all Board members are engaged in focused committees, then the entire Board usually has strong understanding of the status of the most important management functions (for example, programs, marketing and facilities), which can be an advantage if the Chief Executive or another key staff member suddenly leaves and the functions need quick attention.
4. Committees can increase the likelihood of Board members' understanding of the nonprofit's various management functions, thereby increasing the Board's effectiveness in governing these functions.
5. Board meetings can be held less frequently if committees are productive between Board meetings. For example, Board meetings could be held every other month with committee meetings in between those months.
6. Committees can lower the likelihood of burnout among staff if the committees result in Board members assisting with activities that staff otherwise would undertake.
7. For nonprofits that value Board and staff members working together, committees can be an efficient means to organize members to work together in a focused and productive manner.

Potential Disadvantages of Committees

Many disadvantages of committees can occur if the committees are not designed and used well:

1. Board resources are very poorly used when committees are established merely for the sake of having committees. For example, new nonprofit leaders might hear that nonprofits usually have a Personnel Committee, so they might establish that committee and hope that its members somehow find something useful to do. That approach is rarely successful.
2. A similar situation exists if the original priority that the committee was meant to address is no longer a priority. Instead of terminating the committee, it struggles on, trying somehow to be useful.
3. Burnout can occur among committee members if too much is assigned to the committee. This can occur, especially during the early years of nonprofit when it has no, or few, staff members so that much of the nonprofit's work is assumed by Board members.
4. If committees are not carefully chartered (with relevant, specific goals and timelines), then members of the committee can become frustrated and conflicted, wondering what their role is and not feeling useful on the Board.
5. Effectiveness of the Board can be damaged when there are too many committees, many of which are ineffective. That results in a large amount of wasted resources, including time in committees that do not seem to have any purpose.
6. Committees require additional workload on the Board to coordinate the work of all of the committees. This is often an additional responsibility of the Executive Committee.
7. A Board can become splintered if its various committees end up working apart from each other, without some Board function (for example, an Executive Committee) that monitors and integrates the work of the various committees.

Some problems occur because of members' arbitrary philosophies about their Board. For example, some Board members adopt a philosophy "to keep the Board small" or "to have few committees." This is like adopting a philosophy to always keep one's toolbox small – even though some very important tools might not be available because they do not fit in the chosen size of the toolbox. Those philosophies can become a major, unnecessary obstacle to the members doing their job on the Board.

In summary, committees (or temporary task forces) can be tremendous assets to a Board if each is carefully chartered with specific goals aligned with important and current priorities, and has regular assessment of effectiveness to validate whether the committee should continue to operate. Otherwise, committees can be a major hindrance to the effectiveness of the Board.