

Should We Form A Board Committee?

By E. Grant MacDonald



For many non-profit organizations, committees are a common means for getting governance work done. Committees can be useful for studying an issue in order to make recommendations, taking on a project or organizing an event. Committees are a valuable mechanism for involving people, sharing the work, ensuring that different perspectives are incorporated and cultivating volunteer leaders.

Committee meetings on top of board meetings however, are often one of the causes of “burn out” of volunteer directors. The expectation of meetings upon meetings can make it harder to recruit people to the boards in the first place. Committees can also waste valuable volunteer and staff time when their work is subject to a thorough re-examination by the board itself. There is far too much experience in the non-profit sector with committees that always have the same board members on them because no one else will volunteer and committees that exist on paper but seldom or never meet.

Research on teams and task group effectiveness in organizations suggests the following would be good advice to boards of directors thinking about setting up a committee:

- Before setting up a committee, consider whether the issue is really a governance or operational issue. There may not always be a clear answer, but the question is a good one to consider. If the former then the group ought to report to the board. If the latter is needed maybe it ought to exist as an advisory group to the executive director.
- Consider the composition of the committee in relation to the work it does. Is it more effectively done by board members alone, board members and staff working together, or board members, staff and perhaps other volunteers - outside resource people with special expertise? The fact that directors are members does not necessarily turn it into a governance or “board” committee.
- Avoid, with few exceptions, establishing standing committees with broad responsibilities and no specific deadlines or performance expectations. It may be better to re-establish and repopulate a committee when a particular piece of work needs to get done. Consider short time frames for committee work – two or three months, six at the outside.
- Broaden the language of small group governance work and the practice will likely follow. Utilize, for instance, the terms “ad hoc committee”, study group and project team.
- Consider asking individuals on the board to take on tasks on rather than setting up a committee as a way to make the job seem easier. Committees themselves create coordinating work and one person

just as well does some tasks, especially where research is the main activity and the information has to come back to the board anyway.

- If the board wants to set up a group to look at an issue, give the group clear direction and a time frame. It may seem more democratic to let a team of people determine their own mandate but a lack of clarity can make it more difficult to recruit members, determine who should be on it and who else it might consult as part of its work. At the very least the board can support small group performance by asking that it report back early on with some goals and a rough work plan.
- Ensure that any standing committees you do have are focused on governance work. The most obvious of area of governance work is **board recruitment**. A “recruitment and nominations committee” whose horizon extends beyond the next AGM and whose mandate is one of strategic recruitment and board succession planning is one grouping whose mandate should be an ongoing one.¹
- If you have, or are considering setting up, an **executive committee**, the Board as a whole should formally decide how much power it should have. More and more non-profits are doing away with executive committees both because they lead to a sense of there being an inner circle of power and they tend to get caught up in operational issues. An executive committee whose primary focus is on planning board meeting agendas and the annual calendar can be useful. Indeed an executive committee focused on effective governance might take on the leadership role in policy development, board orientation, education and evaluation.
- Think carefully about whether to set up a **personnel committee** or, if you have one, whether it should continue. Of all committees, none is a more likely to second guess the executive director and assume a micro-managing role. You might consider instead a “HR policy committee” as an ad-hoc group to develop or review a personnel policy. You could also consider an “executive director evaluation committee” to work with the ED to determine evaluation criteria and processes, a best practices research exercise. Appoint a separate group to conduct the evaluation. If you have directors interested in being on a personnel committee, especially individuals with HR experience, consider establishing it as an operational committee to advise the ED on personnel practices and assist in hiring.
- For the same reason, be cautious as well about establishing a **finance committee**. Instead, you might consider, as ad hoc committees, a financial policy committee (to create a policy), an annual “budget committee” and an “audit committee” each with specific and different mandates.
- If your board is involved in fundraising you will want to consider a **fundraising committee**. Here too you will want to be very clear about its role. Will its work be focused on organizing fund raising events, the cultivation of members and individual donors or securing government or foundation resources for a new program? A separate committee might better deal each of these activities.
- If your Board is going to provide the leadership on public or stakeholder awareness and policy advocacy (keeping in mind that there are restrictions on advocacy work by charities in Canada), an **advocacy committee** of the board may also be of value. Here too a committee focused on a particular campaign or initiative might be more attractive to volunteers.

¹ See Governing Good resource *A Guide to Successful Board Recruitment*.