



PERSPECTIVES

...on Building Better Non-profit Board Membership.

Committees are a part of the nonprofit board landscape; their effective operation can contribute significantly to the successful functioning of the board itself. This month's Perspectives offers some suggestions to ensure that committees help the nonprofit board do its work better:

- *Assess the effectiveness of your present committee structure. Eliminate any unnecessary committees.* Organizational by-laws routinely require the existence of certain standing committees, which cannot be dissolved unless the bylaws are changed. However, committees beyond those required have a way of collecting in an organization. New ones are formed for perfectly good reasons; then develop a life of their own, and sometimes outlive their intended purpose. Just because a board has inherited a particular mix of committees doesn't mean it has a responsibility to preserve them. It's a good idea to periodically review your committee list, pulling the plug on any that have outlived their usefulness, and redirecting those board resources where they can be more productive. Committees exist for a reason; when that reason no longer exists, neither should the committee.
- *Turn some committees into task forces with specific time frames.* The distinction between "Committee" and "task force" might seem academic, but there's more to the issue than semantics. It's a matter of time. Committees should focus on long-standing issues (e.g., budget or development) that regularly demand the board's attention and oversight. On the other hand, task forces are appropriate for more limited issues or more immediate concerns: evaluating likely sites for a possible relocation of services, for example. Tasks like these can be addressed with more limited resources and within a set time period.
- *Draft a clear job description for each committee. Do not allow the committees themselves to determine their charter.* Objectives are wonderful things. When they are clear and well-stated, they make getting a job done much easier – for committees as well as individuals. Make sure that the board sets the objective(s) for each committee so that their members understand what their job is. It's a mistake to let the committee members do this on their own – this creates the possibility for a disconnect between board and committee. The committee may overlook an objective the board considers important, or the committee could decide to consider issues the board deems irrelevant or is addressing elsewhere – creating a waste

of resources or a duplication of effort. By crafting precise committee job descriptions, a board can anticipate and avoid all these potential problems, and the committees can focus their attention and resources on achieving the board's goals.

- *Choose committed members who can advance the objectives set for the committee and who are able to actively participate in the work.* The whole is only as good as the sum of its parts, so select committee members carefully. Part of the selection criterion involves expertise. Are candidate budget committee members familiar with the subject? However, motivation and availability are also important here. Committee members need to be willing participants in the process – look for someone who can commit the time needed to achieve the committee's objective.
- *Set committee schedules well in advance. Take advantage of electronic communication and virtual meetings.* Don't lose sight of the fact your board members have other lives – professional and personal. Facilitate their committee work in every way possible. Fundamentally, this means planning ahead – setting meeting schedules well in advance, and at times and locations convenient for all. It's also a good idea to ensure committee members confirm the next scheduled meeting before adjourning the current one. Technology has eliminated the need for meeting participants to be in the same room – or even on the same continent. The potential for a wide variety of electronic meetings is there. When time is short and it's not possible to gather the committee in one place, the electronic option is worth considering.
- *Regularly assess the productivity of your committees. Don't tolerate substandard results.* Assessment is a recurring issue in this series. In this case, both the committees themselves and the board need to review committee performance on a regular basis. Where performance is disappointing – where board-determined objectives have not been met – intervention is required.
- *Consider term limits for committee members.* This is a debatable issue. On the one hand, it's a way of infusing fresh perspectives into a committee and preventing staleness. On the other, requiring a willing member with experience and expertise to step aside because a term limit has been reached might not be particularly efficient – particularly if no obvious replacement is available. A decision on this issue could be an outcome of the kind of periodic assessment mentioned above.

Both long-standing committees and those with limited duration and scope can perform valuable service for a nonprofit board. Some time spent on the details of committee formation and operation, and periodic review and assessment will go a long way toward ensuring their success.