



BOARD BRIEF: Board Structure

Board Briefs are "at-a-glance" resources that help board volunteers better support their Boys & Girls Club. They are designed to occur as five-minute education opportunities at board meetings.

SUMMARY

Boards must be thoughtful and intentional about their size. A general rule of thumb in determining board size is that you want the board to be big enough to incorporate a diversity of perspectives and small enough to facilitate both active participation and effective decision-making. Boards must also be thoughtful about their work groups (e.g., standing committees, task forces, advisory councils). Like board size, there is no one structure that fits all Clubs. However, there are general trends to consider when developing or revising board structure.

BOARD SIZE

Occasionally, boards may wish to reflect on their size. During the last decade, the average board size of nonprofits has stayed relatively constant at 16 members. Within the Boys & Girls Club Movement, the average governing board is 21 members strong. A general rule of thumb in determining (or revisiting) board size is that you want the board to be big enough to incorporate a diversity of perspectives and small enough to facilitate both active participation and effective decision-making.

While there is no one right size for a board, a survey of more than 2,000 nonprofit board chairs and chief executives¹ did surface a sweet spot. Boards with 15 to 22 members are rated as more effective by their chief executives and repeatedly report better governance practices. The survey also revealed that nonprofit CEOs experience a Goldilocks phenomenon: Those with large boards wish for a smaller board, those with small boards wish for larger boards, and those with boards of 15 to 22 members feel their board size is "just right."

WORK GROUP STRUCTURES

It is widely understood that the enormous responsibilities of the nonprofit board cannot be accomplished efficiently through board meetings in which everybody does everything. To make effective use of time and resources, boards use work groups. There are various types of work group structures that can exist in any given organization.

- Standing Committees are work groups that deal with ongoing issues, such as financial oversight or governance. While the members of these committees should rotate on and off, the committees themselves last indefinitely because there is a continuous flow of work for them to accomplish.

¹ *Governance Index* survey, BoardSource. 2007.

- Task Forces are established to accomplish a specific objective – such as reviewing bylaws or planning retreats – within a specific timeframe. They are established on an as-needed basis; when the work is done, the group disbands.
- Advisory Councils are created to advise and support the Club and its governing board. Advice can come in the form of technical expertise, connections, or assessment of various programs. Advisory council members have no legal or formal responsibilities.

BOARD STRUCTURE TRENDS

Like board size, there is no one size fits all work group structure; however, there are some general trends that boards should consider:

- A movement away from committees that mimic operations (e.g., program).
- Fewer standing committees and more use of time-limited task forces, resulting in 3-4 standing committees (e.g., Governance, Resource Development, Finance, Audit).
- Increased use of governance committees instead of nominating committees, which are limited to board turnover. The governance committee broadens the scope to include proactive board development and education, as well as board assessment.
- Use of financial committees with qualified expertise, including audit committees for organizations with budget larger than \$2,000,000.
- Boards are limiting the role of the Executive Committee to avoid creating an inner and an outer circle; effective executive committees have two purposes: review CPO and handle emergencies.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are the pros and cons of our current board size?
- Should we increase or decrease the size of the board? Why?
- Should any of our committees be transitioned to a task force?
- Could an advisory council tackle any work of the governing board?
- What changes should we make to our committee structure? Why?
- Are there any committee trends we should follow? Why?

Additional Resources

- BoardSource, *The Committee Series*.
- Bobowick, Marla J. et al. *Transforming Board Structure* (BoardSource, 2001).