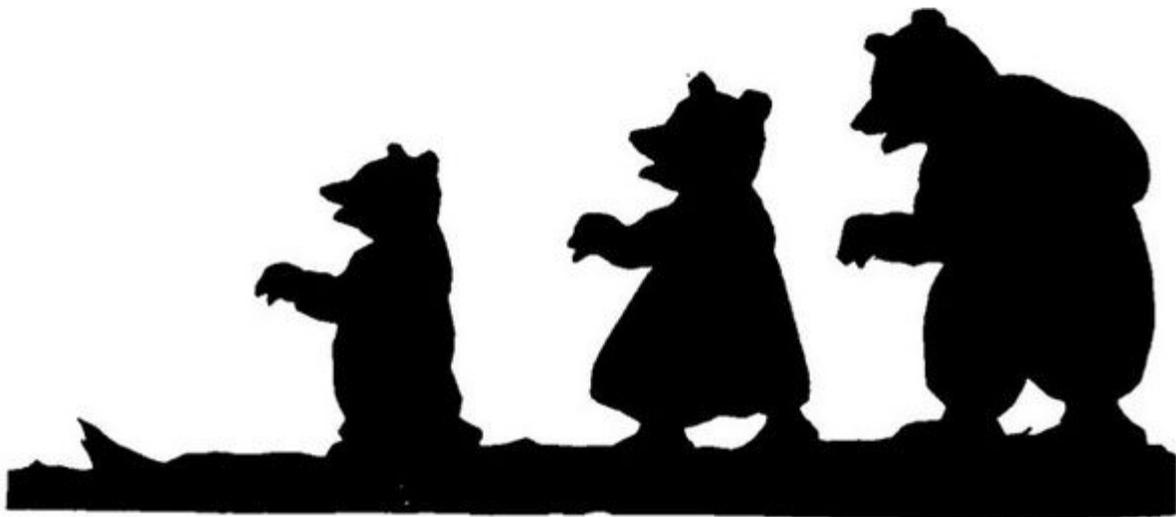


# The Goldilocks Approach to Nonprofit Board Size: What Is “Just Right”?

By  Ruth McCambridge



*“Goldilocks 02/Silhouette 13” by The CMN*

*Let’s start some discussion on board design! Now that NPQ has covered [the finding on board diversity](#) in detail, we’ll be surfacing additional findings from BoardSource’s [2017 Leading with Intent report](#) over the next month or so, starting with this simple, very clear trend.*

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Among many interesting findings in BoardSource’s “[Leading with Intent: 2017 National Index of Nonprofit Board Practices](#)” report is a simple one on board size. Average board size has steadily declined over the past 20 years, as the chart below shows. It’s not clear whether this is due to a distinct set of beliefs, but BoardSource has some thoughts on the trend.

BoardSource acknowledges a board's size has an impact on how it does its work, but they also recognize that different sizes of board may work for different nonprofits. Here's what they say in the report:

*While there is no “right” size for a board, BoardSource believes that it is possible for a board to be either too small or too large. Generally speaking, BoardSource recommends that a board have no fewer than five board members. But even if that minimum has been achieved, a board may be too small if the following circumstances apply:*

- *It does not have access to the expertise and perspectives it needs to make good decisions and plans for the organization.*
- *It struggles to maintain independence or exert influence in a way that provides the necessary oversight and balance to the chief executive.*
- *It does not have access to the networks it needs to build its reach and reputation in a way that enables it to secure the funding and influence it needs to do its work.*

*A board may be too big in these situations:*

- *There are too many board members to meaningfully engage in a full board conversation.*
- *Real deliberation and discussion on big organizational issues is being shifted to the executive committee.*
- *Board members are disconnected from the board's governing role and participation is on an almost honorary basis.*

So, maybe we are slowly drifting from the idea of a board as a collection of as many highly connected people as we can convince to join and toward a body that can make decisions responsibly. We can only hope this will come with recognition that governance can extend far beyond the board of directors, leaving us less driven to see that body as the sole way to involve stakeholders and supporters.

In any case, the trend toward reduced board sizes on average seems rational to us. For those of you still fighting about the question, BoardSource says very clearly there's no external benchmark for the right size of a board. Instead, the range depends on your particular organizational and governance design—thus, the Goldilocks-like search for what's just right for you.

But, we would love to hear your thoughts on the issue of board size. How large or small in your board, and how well does it work? Do you know

what the design thinking is behind the size of your board and your governance design in general?

#### ABOUT RUTH MCCAMBRIDGE



Ruth is Editor in Chief of the Nonprofit Quarterly. Her background includes forty-five years of experience in nonprofits, primarily in organizations that mix grassroots community work with policy change. Beginning in the mid-1980s, Ruth spent a decade at the Boston Foundation, developing and implementing capacity building programs and advocating for grantmaking attention to constituent involvement.