

Governance Committees: Positive Trend on Nonprofit Boards

by Betsy Rosenblatt

The current trend is for boards to reduce the number of standing committees. But at least one new committee is being created more frequently: a Governance Committee or Board Affairs Committee. The Governance Committee replaces the nominating committee or board development committees, but does more than either. The governance committee serves as the "conscience of the board."

The governance committee examines how the board is functioning, how board members communicate, and whether the board is fulfilling its responsibilities and living up to the objectives and aspirations set for itself and the organization. While all board members should understand the organization's mission and goals, the governance committee must consider them with an eye on the board's responsibility to guide the organization and what is required of the board to best accomplish that. The governance committee must be able to articulate the board's vision for the board and find the board members who can put it into action.

Committee responsibilities can be grouped into distinct categories:

Find, keep, and/or get rid of board members

- * Develop board member job descriptions.
- * Create a board profile of what skills and expertise the board and the organization need.
- * Identify potential board members and maintain information about each candidate.
- * Cultivate and recruit new members from beyond the board's traditional circles.
- * With the board chair, help assess and maintain board members' individual commitment, support, and participation in governance duties.
- * Observe and nurture potential leaders within the board.
- * Evaluate board members' eligibility for re-election.

Educate board members

- * Orient new board members to ensure that they have adequate materials and understand their roles and responsibilities.
- * Involve board members in "continuing education." The governance committee can update board members (about new programs, legislative action, and so forth) and continue to improve their skills as board members.
- * Establish an effective communications network to keep board members apprised of activities through newsletters, board and committee minutes, media reports, phone calls, and thank you notes.

Evaluate the board's performance

- * Annually lead the board in its self-assessment and develop recommendations to the board for self-improvement.
- * Discuss with the chief executive staff (and perhaps other staff)their views of the board's performance and ways to strengthen the board in both its governing and supporting role.

These particular tasks are only the skeleton of the governance committee's job. The spirit of the committee is to ensure that the board is doing its job and doing it well, and if not, come up with suggestions to remedy that.

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See also at <http://www.boardcafe.org>:

Should the Board Have Committees? If So, Which Ones? January 1999

Job Descriptions for Board Officers, November 1998

Self-Assessment Survey for the Board, May 2000

Four Cool Ways to Recruit New Board Members, June 1998