

Role of the Executive Committee

by Hildy Gottlieb http://www.help4nonprofits.com/BrainTeaser/BrainTeaser-Role_of_Executive_Committee.htm

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Q: How Can We Optimize the Role of the Executive Committee?

A: Traditionally, the role of the Executive Committee was to act on behalf of the board during the interim times between board meetings. Because of that important role, the committee was traditionally comprised of the board officers and committee chairs.

As things evolved over time, rather than just meeting and acting when needed, the Executive Committee came to be a standing committee, meeting every month, typically one week prior to the board meeting. At those meetings, the Executive Committee generally reviews the major issues facing the organization, weighing pros and cons and making preliminary decisions, to be ratified by the board as a whole at the actual board meeting.

Along the way, another change has taken place that has dramatically impacted the role of the Executive Committee: With easy access to conference calls and email, there is no longer a need for a small body to act on behalf of the board between meetings. In the event of an emergency, a board can meet via phone or internet at any time. And that renders the most critical role of the Executive Committee obsolete!

However, obsolescence is not the worst news about Executive Committees:

In almost every board with a strong, active Executive Committee, the board as a whole is disengaged. That should come as no surprise - the board's role has been usurped by the Executive Committee! When the Executive Committee has already discussed the "good stuff," the only remaining role for the board as a whole is to act as a ratifying body. And that is not very engaging! (Not to mention the fact that the board as a whole is accountable for that decision. With that being the case, shouldn't the whole board participate in the discussions that lead to their decisions?)

The Executive Committee's primary purpose is obsolete. And the committee's spirit of engagement is actually disengaging the rest of the board. It is definitely time to re-think the role of the Executive Committee.

Transforming Your Executive Committee

If the above is reflective of your board, take some time at your board meeting to discuss some of the following questions:

Interim Decision-Making

Every once in a while, there is the need for board-level decisions to be made between meetings.

- In those circumstances, what does your board want the protocol to be? Who will decide whether or not the board needs to meet for that interim meeting?
- How will the interim meeting be held? What approach is your board most comfortable with? (Internet meetings via email discussion, via chat room? Conference calls? Video conference? Etc.)

- What are the legalities of holding meetings in your state / province? Is it legal to meet / make decisions in any manner other than face to face?
- Will any of these changes to procedure require a bylaws change?

Creating a Committee of the Board (Or Governance Committee)

Organizations who consider eliminating the primary purpose of the Executive Committee - those interim decisions - often lament the loss of the committee that embodied the institutional wisdom of the board. Because the officers and committee chairs are usually the longest tenured board members, there is often a sense that these individuals should be meeting together, to help guide the work of the board.

Your board might then consider renaming and restructuring the Executive Committee, to become the Committee of the Board. The role of that committee would be to ensure the board has everything it needs to do its job.

To that end, have your board consider the following questions:

- What would help our board do its job better?
- What could the committee be doing, to ensure all board members are engaged in the board's leadership role?
- How could they help aim the board at community end results as the board's primary area of accountability? How could they help the board focus on measuring the organization's results in the community?
- How could this committee help the board understand how to be accountable for legal oversight and operational oversight?
- What role might this committee have in annual planning for the organization? In creating and maintaining the board's ongoing education program?
- What might the committee's role be in recruitment? Orientation?
- Would this be the group that should set the agenda for the board's meetings?
- What other work might this committee handle, to ensure the board has everything it needs to do its job in a way that effectively and accountably aims at creating great results for the community?

As your board discusses these Board Mechanics issues, other issues will arise. Perhaps succession planning (for board members and for the staff). Perhaps a specific board issue that has been a hot-button issue for a while.

By freeing up the Executive Committee to become the Committee of the Board, this committee will be charged with actively advocating for the board's needs, to make that body as effective as possible in leading the organization to create great community results