

Board and Committee Leadership

by Debora Ott

Typical committee titles include:

- Board Development Committee (formerly, the Nominating Committee)
- Finance Committee
- Development/Fundraising Committee
- Marketing & Communications
- Program Committee (formal evaluation plans of programs are required by law; The Georgia Center for Nonprofits has a list of people who do evaluations)

Board Tips:

- A board member's participation is often characterized as giving: wealth, wisdom, and work or time, talent and treasure
- Effective leadership of committees and boards helps eliminate micro-management
- The ideal board size is 9-19. It is difficult to get things done with less than 9 directors; 19 is the largest number of relationships an executive director can manage
- Always have board officers, but in a small board, an executive committee is not needed since it can set up a "haves" and "have-nots" division on the board
- Plan meetings for the whole year as part of the budgeting and planning process
- Give or get—each board member contributes or raises a specific amount of money each year
- Board members' donations should be commensurate with their ability to contribute
- Board should meet at least quarterly or every other month
- Have several face-to-face meetings but use technology such as conference calls to move business forward when needed
- Votes by email are allowed when there isn't a quorum at a meeting
- The board attendance policy should be in the by-laws
- There is no reason to keep disruptive people, those who don't keep financial obligations, people who don't show up at meetings
- Board meetings should last 90 minutes maximum
 - Start on time
 - Don't recap for latecomers
 - Don't read committee reports at meetings
 - Do have strategic talks—higher level conversations
 - Presentations can be made and trends discussed
 - Meetings can have themes
 - Spend the majority of the time talking about the future not the past

- If a meeting looks like it is going to run over in time, ask permission from the group
- Email all committee reports to board members well in advance of a board meeting
- Have action formatted minutes
- Create a buddy system—a 6 month formal relationship—for new directors so they can learn the unspoken expectations of being a new board member
- Create an Alumni Board for people who roll off the board. Invite them to a party twice a year with the governing board.

Committee Tips:

- Every board member should serve on at least one committee
- The functioning size for a committee is 6-8 people
- Have at least 2 board members on each committee; one can be the board chair
- Non-board members may be on most committees
- Committees should meet in-between regularly scheduled board meetings
- Committees are not mini-boards; any recommendations must be approved of by the board
- Do not have committee meetings immediately preceding the board meeting:
 - Reports can't be submitted in advance
 - Total meeting time will be too long
- Committee leaders can phone board leaders in advance of a board meeting to let them know which recommendations will be coming up at the meeting and ask for their support
- When the board rejects a committee's recommendations:
 - Go back into committee and let them know that they didn't do a good enough selling job to the board
 - Ask the committee to come as a group and make a presentation to the board
 - Give people data in addition to your best thinking
- Staff should not give board committee reports at board meetings
- All nonprofit board meetings are open to the public
- Executive sessions can be closed to the public

Orientation:

- The introduction of policies and procedures tends to help weed those who aren't serious off the board
- Policies, procedures, committee schedules, contact information can all be online as well
- Devise a Buddy System wherein you match new directors with veterans. This 6 month formal relationship allows new board members to understand the unspoken expectations of being a board member.

- Hand-outs to discuss at the orientation:
 - Glossary/list of acronyms for funders and programs
 - Board and committee meetings for the whole year
 - List of board contacts with affiliations and committee assignments
 - Indemnity protection policy for board members
 - By-laws: attendance policy
 - Document retention policy
 - Whistle blower protection policy “we will not retaliate against someone who bring attention to a matter”
 - Financial:
 - Current year’s budget with comparison to last year; include next year’s projected budget if available
 - Banking resolutions: Cash reserve and endowment usage, signature requirements, and payback timing
 - Check signing provisions
 - Board/staff budget/financial process
 - Make sure board knows how funders’ money is allocated across program lines

The Role of Board Chair:

- Co-chairs can be effective if the individuals are able work well together
- Be mindful of agreement and disagreement in the boardroom
- Try to gain consensus; in the absence of consensus say:
 - “I’m glad we reached a decision”
 - “Let’s agree to disagree”
 - “If this doesn’t work we’ll be back for more conversation”
 - “Outside of these closed doors, we agree to support the decision”
- Manage conflict resolution in the boardroom. Some techniques for handling conflict include:
 - Standing near domineering people to stop them from speaking
 - Posting a sheet of paper that says “parking lot” and listing disruptive person’s concerns so the board can take them up later
- Make sure board work is distributed evenly
- The board or committee chair can help keep committees on track by asking:
 - “Where are you and the committee in your progress?”
 - “Is there anything you need?”
 - “What do you need to know to get the job done?”
 - “How can I help?”
- People don’t get engaged with their work on a board if they:
 - Don’t know what they are supposed to do
 - Are not doing something they enjoy
 - Are frustrated because of the lack of progress

- Conduct exit interviews to determine why individuals leave the board before their terms expire

Tip sheet based in part on an Atlanta Women's Foundation, Women on Board workshop, November 6, 2004, Terri Theisen presenting; notes, Debora Ott