

Back to the Drawing Board

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Most of the boards of our sponsored ministries have several committees composed of board members and others. Generally we expect our members to serve on board committees. Boards have functioned in this manner for hundreds of years. Is this structure optimal for your board?

Posing the question is not to suggest that our boards dissolve all committees but rather that we step back and determine what best serves the boards' needs. We begin this adventure by looking at governance in general in a different way and then turn to the question of board committees.

From Oversight to Leadership

For many boards, governing is a series of routines: overseeing budgets, receiving audits, hearing reports, approving strategic plans, and so on. What would happen if we looked at governance more as leadership than oversight?

At least three modes (ways of thinking and acting) of governance have been identified ([Governance As Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards](#), John Wiley & Sons, 2004) by Richard P. Chait, William P. Ryan and Barbara E. Taylor) that together constitute governance as leadership. The first is the **fiduciary** mode that ensures that we are faithful to our mission, accountable for performance and use of our resources, and compliant with relevant laws and regulations. As board members, we provide fiduciary leadership that makes it possible for our ministries to be viable for the long term. Most of us are accustomed to this mode and perhaps assume this is the only appropriate mode for governance.

The second mode is the **strategic** mode that ensures that we are setting direction and strategies to guide our ministries into a successful future. As board members, we provide strategic leadership by deciding what the organization should pay attention to and how to distinguish the ministry in its market. As we actively engage in strategic planning and implementation, we grow more accustomed to this mode.

The third mode is the **generative/creative** mode that ensures that we frame the issues our ministries face and provide new perspectives on them, new ways of looking at them that have the potential to unleash new solutions, new options. As board members, we provide generative leadership when we find new approaches that help us think our way out of boxes. We are least accustomed to this mode, unless we are fortunate enough to have a few members on our boards who "see things differently." Generative thinking can be stimulated by anything in our experience and occur at anytime. The excitement and value come in the application of the insights.

For example, a side comment from a colleague at work may spark a solution for a problem that later surfaces at a board meeting.

Our boards will function optimally when all three modes are present. We may need to rethink our meeting agendas to allow more time for the kind of interaction, free give-and-take, that fosters generative thinking. We may also look at potential board members differently when recruiting. As board members, we are called to bring our insights, energy and desire to do something for our ministries to the triathlon event of governing.

Board Committees: Yes, No or Maybe

Now, if we want to move toward board leadership rather than just oversight, all board committees must enhance the board's leadership. Board committees then must engage in the three modes of leadership. In many cases generative thinking occurs spontaneously in the small setting and interaction of a committee meeting.

Can you imagine a board without committees? In fact some boards never need a committee. There is no committee that is necessary to governance. Board committees are simply one way a governing board organizes itself to be more efficient. They are a structural tool, available to but not required of any board.

Does your board need them? It depends. Can the board deal with all of its business itself, as committee of the whole? You have to decide. If you decide to use board committees, here are a few guiding principles of governance that may be useful in forming board committees.

- Governance structures are not immutable.
- There is no one-size-fits-all form of governance.
- Boards themselves should handle as many matters as possible.
- The work of some committees can be achieved by an ad hoc group.
- The number of members on a committee ought to be sufficient to the task.
- Serving on committees is a good training ground for board leadership.
- No committee should be formed to assist the chief executive or other staff member in doing her/his job.

Let's assume that from time to time your board finds it helpful to have certain tasks carried out by smaller groups, particularly the task of gathering information and seeking options. They work in service of the board with a specific charge for a defined period of time (frequently called ad hoc committees or task forces). Members of the committee are chosen or volunteer because they have some relevant skills and experience that bear directly on the charge of the committee. There is an urgency and an importance to the tasks of the committee that focus members' energy. They understand what is being asked of them and are enthusiastic about making a contribution. The committee reports its findings to the full board. The board has been looking forward to this needed input for its discussion and action.

This process highlights several points.

- The board delegates some work to a group for a short time and never loses sight of the fact that it is the board's responsibility.
- The committee speaks to the board, not for the board.
- The committee is not a "small board" that can set board policy or advise staff.
- The committee meets when and as often as necessary to complete the tasks in the defined time period.
- The tasks to be completed are clear.
- The committee develops a work plan to achieve the tasks.
- Committee members take responsibility for completing the tasks on time.
- When the work of the committee is complete, the committee sunsets.

Board committees, like the board itself, should be intentional, flexible and productive.

To push efficiency to its limits, some boards start each year with a clean slate. All committees are abolished automatically and only the ones that are still needed are recreated. An evaluation process allows the board to reassess the composition of the committee and redirect the focus of the working group if necessary.

There are benefits to this approach.

- Stagnation on committees can be avoided.

- Regular assessment ensures that committees meet a real need.
- More opportunities for leadership are created.
- Board members expect changes.

Take-Home Lessons

- Be clear about the purpose of each board committee and define what it exists to accomplish.
- Give considerable thought to who should sit on each committee.
- Conduct a review of the necessity of each committee to the good functioning of the board each year.