

Agile and Efficient: Board Committees and Committee Structures that Work

The use of committees by boards is ubiquitous—as it should be, considering a small group’s agility when compared to a whole board. Unfortunately, boards often end up with unwieldy committee structures, groups that take up time and resources with little to show for it, or committee participants who feel burnt out and overworked.

To avoid these undesirable results, consider the following suggestions when utilizing committees to support your work.

What and why

Understand the basics of why committees are helpful to the board in the first place. A board committee is a small working group assembled by the board, consisting of board members or nonboard members, for the purpose of supporting the board’s work. Boards might have committees that are either standing or working, also known as ad hoc. Standing committees do work on an ongoing basis; their scope, purpose, and personnel are usually described in a committee charter or similar document. Ad hoc committees are created by the board to fulfill a specific task or objective and are dissolved when that task is completed.

Board committees are useful because their smaller size and relatively informal processes can be more agile and efficient than the whole board’s. However, board committees do their work on behalf of the board and in support of the board’s overall mission and objectives, not to achieve a purpose of their own.

Ensure that committees take on the appropriate kinds of tasks.

Committees can be helpful due to their agility, but they also create some specific challenges. They have no authority by themselves, since legal and moral authority exists with the full board, and their

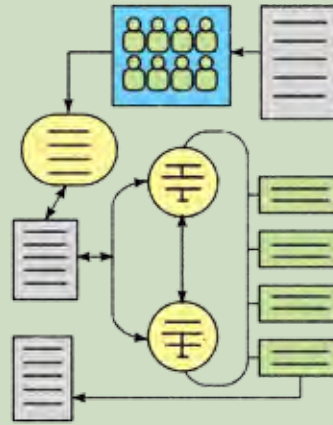
work, because it takes place apart from the board’s regular meeting space, often occurs without the awareness or investment of non-committee members. These traits make committee work most appropriate for detail-oriented labor that does not require full board participation.

When you must do deep thinking, consider abstract questions, or make a deeply impactful decision, a committee would likely be inappropriate. For example, an elections committee is well-suited to take on the busy work of organizing an elections process but is less appropriate for exploring deep questions about how democracy should articulate itself in the co-op. See the difference? One is best considered in the context of a smaller, more agile group. The other really needs to be deeply understood and considered by the whole board.

Use committees for: detail-oriented planning and research; organizing a specific event or short-term process; writing and editing; or crafting a proposal or set of options for the whole board to consider.

State it and follow it

Be clear about the purpose and expectations of the board’s general use of committees and of the specific committees themselves. Boards should have any expectations about their own use of committees clearly articulated in board policy. It can be helpful for a board to state that its own use of committees should not undermine either the authority of the main group or the ability of the board to communicate holistically, in a unified way. Also, its use of committees should not impair role clarity in the organization, or who is responsible for specific job duties or decision-making. (For an example of these policies, see the Co-op Board



Leadership Development Policy Register Template, Policy Title: C7—Board Committee Principles).

In addition, the board should describe in a committee charter for each standing committee its key information, such as the group’s specific purpose or product, personnel, or reporting requirements. If the charter is not clear, or does not exist, then it’s time for the board to act, rather than for the committee to do this work on its own.

Create transparency about the board’s committees’ work. As noted, committee work often occurs apart from the whole group, inadvertently leaving non-committee members in the dark. To avoid confusion, have processes in the board’s life that allow this work to be described to the board and/or management and integrated into the board’s long-term plan.

The details of ad hoc committees, such as who is responsible, what is being produced, and the expected due date of completion, should show up on a board’s monthly commitment list to be included in the board packet for each meeting. Finally, assuming the board has policies that govern its own use of committees (see above), boards should take the time to regularly review these policies and the committee charters themselves.

Obey your own rules. It is possible that the co-op’s bylaws may dictate how board committees are to be handled: stating who may serve, or who may chair a committee, for example. Know these policies and follow them, or change them as needed.

Self-assess: How do we add value?

Finally, do some self-assessment. Review your committee structure regularly. Avoid the (often well-meaning) tendency for committees to create extra work to justify their own existence or create their own purpose when the board has failed to do so. Examine your systems with an eye towards continual improvement and simplification. Remember, these committees exist to support the board, not the other way around—if a committee is not adding value to the board’s work, it should be altered or eliminated

When considering the formation of a new committee, ask yourself: why is it necessary to create a subgroup? How will the subgroup communicate the substance and progress of its work to the board? How will our board hold it accountable?

For your existing committees, ask: do we have policies that provide guidelines for the use of committees? If so, are we following our own policies? How do our existing committees support the board’s long-term plans and goals? How do our processes create awareness and investment about our committees’ purpose and work?

If you serve on a committee, ask: what is our purpose? How do we add value to the board’s work? How do we share our progress with the rest of the board? What expectations does the board have of us? What expectations do we have of the board?

—TODD WALLACE