

Role of the National Board Federated System Board Source

The national (or sometimes regional) board of a federated system has the challenge to communicating its role and function to its own affiliates as well as to the organization's constituency at large. There is often considerable confusion about the parent organization's mission and mandate, its internal governance structure (relating to the board's composition and its representation of constituents), and how the national board defines its relationship with its affiliates and clearly communicates its message.

What is a federated system?

A federated system consists of a national organization and its affiliates or chapters. There is a board governing the parent organization and each chapter has its own local board. Working together, the objective for the parent and its affiliates is to accomplish their mandate more efficiently and effectively than would be possible for several independent organizations working alone. Examples of federated organizations include United Way of America, Red Cross, and Planned Parenthood.

Role of the board

The role of a national board is multifold. It is the governing body of the parent organization and, in that function, leads the overall national effort. Some of its responsibilities include:

- Defines the mission and mandate for the federated system. This mission will also be adopted by the affiliates even if they have different ways of carrying out programs and projects that are more applicable to their own region or immediate constituents.

- Defines the purpose of the parent organization. As the governing body, the board's role is to clarify how the parent organization fits into the federated system and how it will carry out its mission. The board needs to project the organization as the national leader and be a guide and provide support to its affiliates.

- Visions the future of the organization. As the national leader, the board cannot have only an internal focus but it should tie the organization to its environment, the society in general, and all the external forces that may have an impact on its future.

- Serves as the primary advocate for the cause. The board pioneers the message and purpose of the organization. Its concern is about the organization's impact and therefore needs to find the most effective tools to campaign for its beliefs, principles, and convictions.

- Defines the brand and standards for the organization. The board communicates the necessary guidelines to all affiliates and monitors that the organization's brand is honored.

- Supports the affiliates. The board encourages communication with the affiliates and determines the give-and-take of this relationship. The national organization provides helpful resources (funds, materials, information, training) that aid the work of the chapters.

- Pays attention to its own development. The board needs to realize that by not caring about its own capacity, it will have difficulties in fulfilling the above responsibilities.

Board composition

One of the toughest challenges for federated organizations is to find the right balance between representing its constituents (hear the affiliates and their concerns) and building a board that meets the needs of a nationally-focused governing body. Most federated structures involve chapter representatives to the parent board. The purpose is to create a tighter link between the end-users of the services and the entity that determines the direction for the entire federated system. There are numerous approaches to accomplishing this from multi-layered governing bodies to affiliate members appointing and electing their own agents to the national board. Here are some examples of how federated organizations may link to their chapters:

Separate representational membership bodies (National Council, House of Delegates) may have varying powers but work closely with the governing board to incorporate the affiliate view.

Chapters or regional areas have quotas for electing their representatives to the board. The board may also include at-large members.

All board members are elected by the chapters.

Local or regional advisory councils provide feedback to a self-perpetuating board.

Board focus

The chapter-elected members of the parent board need to be able to differentiate their roots from their present function. The term “representation” needs to be put into proper perspective. They should not serve merely as the advocates for their own causes. Rather, their role should be to bring to the table all the various ideas, concerns, opinions, and feedback received from the home front, listen openly to similar presentations and views by fellow board members, and, after appropriate deliberation, help to form the direction the full board adopts in its efforts to fairly and wisely serve the entire constituency.

Every chapter-elected member — as well as every other member of the board — has a duty of loyalty to the parent organization. When he or she accepts the call to board service there is the expectation of a transformation from local advocate to national spokesperson — a focus change from local problems to major strategic issues. If a board member is not able to make this transition because of the incapacity to work with the big picture or difficulty in dealing with any duality of interest, that person may not be the best possible choice for serving the parent organization.

Education

The board’s governance committee has a big task. It educates board members on their roles, clarifies the expectations of their service, and provides the necessary tools and training to ensure that the full board is able to fulfill its mandate effectively and without bias. But the education needs to begin with the bodies that nominate board member candidates and determine the slate for election. If the local chapters are not able to envision the demands of serving on the parent organization’s board, they are not able to choose the best representative for the job. The governance committee needs to reach out to the field and

articulate the ideal characteristics of its board members and educate nominating and electing bodies on the burdens of conflicts of interest or duality of interest.