

GOVERNANCE EDUCATION



Downsizing the Board

In the latest BoardSource survey, 60 percent of the respondents felt that their board had just the right size; 24 percent indicated that the board was too small; and 16 percent said that it was too large. Determining what the optimal size should be is not a simple task. Shrinking or growing the board may eliminate some of the problems but often new ones get created at the same time. When a board decides to downsize, it can make this restructuring succeed by asking the right questions first.

What is an ideal size for our board?

This question should be revisited on a regular basis whether a change is being considered or not. Different board members will undoubtedly mark down different numbers. Posing this question in front of the full board forces the board to assess whether a change might be beneficial. Whether the board sees justification in keeping the present size or decides to change the size in the future, the conversation will help the board clarify the criteria for its composition and the expectations for each member. Some of the factors affecting the board size might include

- **Workload** — Quantity of work is a factor in determining how many workers the board needs.
- **Composition of the board** — Individual board members have an impact on the board's collective wisdom. The more intentional the board's diversity strategy is, the easier it is to build a board with the right qualities and perspectives and vicariously control its size.
- **Life cycle** — Each board needs to figure out at specific phases in its life cycle what an optimal size looks like and then take decisive measures to reach it. As the organization matures, so do the demands for the board to adapt.
- **External requirements** — Some affiliated organizations or government funders may retain a right to nominate most or some of the board members. These external demands usually are beyond the board's control and can have an impact on the overall size.

What are the potential advantages of downsizing?

If the board is encumbered by its size, downsizing may increase its efficiency. Some benefits from this decision include

Communication — It is easier to reach each other in a smaller group. Discussions automatically become more interactive and inclusive, it is easier to become familiar with individual style and what makes fellow board members tick.

Engagement — In a smaller group each individual matters. It is not possible to simply coast along as everyone's participation is necessary and noticeable. Being active and engaged also tends to render the greatest personal satisfaction. Each board member has a better chance to recognize his or her own contribution and feel further motivated by it.

Camaraderie — On a small board members tend to know each other better and be more familiar with each other's personal lives. It is possible to form professional and personal friendships. A sense of camaraderie can also facilitate tough negotiations.

Cost — Naturally it is less expensive to maintain a smaller board. For instance, it is possible to reduce the cost of meetings and potential travel reimbursements for board members.

How can we best define the composition for a smaller board?

With fewer members on the board it is even more essential to get the mixture right, to cover all the bases and ensure that the board truly reflects the needs of the organization. Create a profile of an ideal board. Identify the qualities you will miss during downsizing as former board members leave their seats. Scrutinize all the assets potential and remaining board members bring to the team. Don't recruit token representatives. Expect each board member to possess genuine interest in your work,

multifaceted professional and analytical skills, leadership qualities, capacity to integrate into a team setting, and ample commitment and time to do the work.

If we can't keep all the 'willing and able' board members, how can we still ensure their involvement? Never let motivated and contributing former members slip into oblivion. Recruit retiring board members as committee or advisory council members. Use them as mentors for new board members. Ask them to chair a special event, write an article for you, or keep referring new board member candidates for the board. Engage or retain them as expert advisors. Keep them informed via your newsletter and, when appropriate, invite them to your organizational events. Former board members can act as valuable ambassadors for your organization.

What other structural elements could improve our work - and make it more interesting?

Eliminating board seats eliminates some flexibility and pressures the board to be even more thoughtful in decision making.

Committees — Reassess your committee structure. Do you really need all the committees or could the full board address some of the issues? Is an executive committee superfluous? Could you rely on advisory councils to help with some work?

Outside expertise — Your board probably is not able to be an expert on everything. Rely on outsiders to provide thorough, timely, and focused counseling. Engage outsiders to help with work that otherwise is simply too time consuming. And, don't forget the staff; they are also experts and can provide support to the board.

Alternate roles — Try to share the duties. Alternating leaders in various positions and tasks can keep burnout away. Give everyone a chance to participate in all facets of board work.

Appropriate work — Evaluate whether your board is focused on the right work. Is there a clear understanding of what belongs to the board and what belongs to the staff? Is the board governing rather than managing the organization?

Results

A key purpose of downsizing the board is to improve its efficiency. When aptly carried out, effectiveness will follow. After the new board is in place or the process has a solid start, it is time to set the priorities for the new board. Make the form enhance the function by reviewing the original downsizing plan and restating the new expectations. Restructuring is about the future. Regular monitoring of the board's performance will ensure that the change will bring real results.