

From the Nonprofit Board Chair Seat

Are you a nonprofit Board Chair who has a board development or management issue, concern or challenge keeping you up at night (and who doesn't)? Let me know. I'll try to provide a response that can help you sleep better. So, please, send your questions to: mikeb@bwb-solutions.com. This on-going column is dedicated to questions and answers to simple and complex nonprofit governance challenges.

Question: As chair of my board I have continued the tradition by chairs before me (and as reflected in the by-laws) to meet regularly with the board officers and CEO in what is referred to as the executive committee. But, I'm hearing executive committees are on the way out. Can you provide an explanation on what you see as the executive committee story?

Answer: You are correct. There has been recent chatter (at least among consultants) over the role and even validity of executive committees.

Much of this chatter has been stimulated by a common story: board members who feel they have little or no role to play themselves, including in board meetings, because all of the discussion and decisions have taken place ahead of the full board meeting. The executive committee members believe they are supporting the full board and/or the homework of the board. The non-executive members cite that they believe their authority is being usurped and they are feeling disenfranchised, unneeded and unvalued.

So, can executive committees, by their nature, run the risk of usurping the authority of the board and in turn, disenfranchise board members? Maybe. In my experience, when one part of a group predetermines the prospective results of fiduciary, strategic and/or

generative discussions, both collective and individual wisdom and energies can be lost. It is only through inclusive and full engagement of the whole board that full value can be derived.

Is eliminating executive committees the answer to the problems created by their existence? Not necessarily.

Executive committees do offer many benefits. Because committee members have often worked their way up in the ranks, many carry the nonprofit's institutional memory to provide wisdom from the past. Also, these committees are generally small in number and consist of the senior volunteer leadership, so they are easy to convene and agile, being responsive to the executive in particular to address immediate and unanticipated issues.

Depending on their specific assignments as board members, the executive committee is in a strong position to plan the agendas for board meetings. Most importantly, this committee is particularly and perhaps uniquely capable of serving as a sounding board and brain trust to the chair and the executive director.

However, many believe all of these added values can be achieved without the executive committee. Board meeting agendas can be constructed through a process organized by the Chair or Vice Chair in consultation with other committee chairs and the executive. Board policy can guide what steps should be taken for the majority of issues limiting the need for most emergency responses. And, the Chair alone is more than capable of serving as the sounding board and certainly the liaison to other board members when communication with the board is needed.

So, is there really a need for an executive committee? No, there is little need. A board can probably do just fine with-

out an executive committee assuming all that I have described is properly in place.

In conclusion, board executive committees, more often than not, have a high risk in usurping the board's authority, devaluing the board and disenfranchising the board members.

At the same time, executive committees can have a function. They provide guidance, wisdom and support to the board chair and the executive director.

I'd welcome hearing about your executive committees and recommendations they might have. Feel free to comment to my blog:

www.nonprofitboardcrisis.typepad.com.

Mike Burns is a partner in BWB Solutions. He writes two blogs, and is adept at helping nonprofits develop solutions to internal challenges (especially board/CEO) and assess their readiness for mergers and revenue generating ventures.

