

Our Board Doctors help to cure some common Board ills

There is nothing like experience to breed good judgement. In each edition of Board Builder we extract the know-how of experienced “Board Doctors,” finding a remedy for some of the common problems that threaten the health and vitality of non-profit boards and committees.



“Our group is a small, community-based non-profit organisation. There are 12 people serving on the board and it seems a little excessive. Should we think about scaling things down?”

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First Glance – How bad is the problem?

The first thing I would say is that there is no “correct” size for a board. It really does depend on the focus and activities of the particular group.

You say your group is small, but without knowing the total membership and the type of work you do, it is hard to comment on your board size.

For example, if your organisation is membership based or if the board represents key stakeholders, perhaps having less than 12 means an important group is not represented?

Or perhaps, board members are geographically distant and your organisation covers a wide area, so 12 are needed to ensure all aspects of the mission of the organisation are represented and that a quorum is available at each meeting?

First Step – What is the most burning issue? What needs to be done?

There are some pros and cons of a board of 12 members. Assuming all 12 are at meetings most of the time, the large group can mean some people do not get a chance to speak; the quieter voices remain unheard; or meetings go on for hours as consensus is hard to reach.

Also the staff can spend much of their precious time just trying to get everyone together! I have also seen cliques form within a larger board and this undermines collective effort.

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On the positive side, the workload is shared and diversity is maintained in a 12-person board. In addition a larger board should ensure there is broad expertise.

On the other hand, a smaller board can work better because everyone is able to participate in discussion, members take ownership of decisions and a sense of unity and common purpose seems easier to develop.

Commonly it is held that a board of 5 is a minimum to cover a broad range of perspectives without losing the sense of unity.

I personally like the idea of having an odd number on the board so there is never an impasse in terms of voting for or against a proposition. But the downside of a small board can be lack of diversity or expertise, difficulty getting a quorum and not enough people to do the work.

Succession planning is hard also with a small board.

Next Steps – What other steps should be taken?

Perhaps nothing needs to be done if the board is working well, but if you really feel 12 is “excessive”, why not ask the board and the membership how they each feel about the functioning of the board at present?

If the majority feel a change is needed, there are ways to do this that minimise angst among current board members that their role may be changed or that they are no longer wanted.

Firstly you will need to check your constitution: Do you have a set period of election to the board? If so, attrition could slowly make the board smaller. If not, then arrange to change the constitution so that members have a set term of office.

Another suggestion is to create an executive from amongst the board whereby three or four people take on the key tasks of the board (secretary, treasurer, fundraiser) and this group meets more frequently than the whole board.

Another option is to create an advisory board, where experienced members move to after their term on the board is done; the advisory board is made up of “organisation elders”. It helps with keeping organisational history and memory alive.

Red Flags – How can we stop this happening again?

All organisations grow and change. It is the responsibility of the board to regularly review its own functioning, its ability to enact its vision, to build its expertise as required and to fulfil its governance role in the most effective way it can.

Your constitution should be a living document. Having members vote on a change to the constitution is the most transparent means of making a needed change. If a board reviews its own performance annually, with time dedicated to a thorough discussion, then it may be in a better position to determine any changes that need to happen.

I think open, honest and regular discussion is important to determine the best governance system for any group.