

Size of the Board

Is there an ideal board size? Possibly, but the ideal size is likely to be different for each board. One size does not fit all. Each board needs to define its optimal capacity at any given time.

How to determine the best size for your board?

Start by asking what *your* board needs to accomplish. Optimal board size may vary according to the moment in the board's life cycle, its mission, its fundraising necessities, and whether it is a national or a local board.

In most states the laws dictate the minimum size for nonprofit boards. Usually it is three, but in some states only one board member is required. Some boards function under a representational mandate; their composition needs to reflect the constituency, and this creates an upward pressure on the size. As productive communication is affected by the size of a gathering, group dynamics may become a criterion for structuring your board.

Common characteristics of large and small boards

Large boards:

Pros:

- A larger size provides enough people to more easily manage the work load of the board.
- Fundraising becomes less of a burden when the responsibility is divided among many members.
- More perspectives are represented.

Cons:

- Bigger boards may not be able to engage every board member in a meaningful activity, which can result in apathy and loss of interest.
- Meetings are difficult to schedule.
- There is a tendency to form cliques and core groups, thus deteriorating overall cohesion.
- There is a danger of loss of individual accountability.
- It may be difficult to create opportunities for interactive discussions.

Small boards:

Pros:

- Communication and interaction is easier. Board members get to know each other as individuals.
- Potential satisfaction from service can be greater due to constant and meaningful involvement.
- Every person's participation counts.

Cons:

- Heavy work load may create burnout.

Fundraising may become a major burden on the shoulders of a few.
Important opinions or points of view might not be represented.

Average board sizes

Remember that every board is different. Average figures only reflect what exists, not a recommended norm. Newly-formed boards often start cautiously with a small number of members, and expand as the organization gets more established and the programs and services diversify. It is common to encounter large boards in older, more institutionalized organizations where a principal role of the board members tends to be fundraising. Small community-based nonprofits are often governed by a few devoted volunteers. A recent BoardSource survey found that, among those nonprofits who responded, the average size of the board is 16, the median 15.

Regulation of size in the bylaws

Normally the size of the board is determined in the bylaws of the organization. It is wise to set a guideline within a certain range, not an exact number, so that an unforeseen situation does not force the board to contradict its bylaws. Term limits and constant recruitment secure a continuous balance. Some boards find it important to have an uneven number of members to avoid a tie vote. This, however, can be managed by the chair who can either abstain from voting or cast a determining vote to break a tie.

Resizing

Structural factors, including size, can have consequences on the board's efficiency. Down-sizing or increasing the size may eliminate some road blocks, but the board's core problem may lie elsewhere. Before restructuring the board, it may be wise to search elsewhere for reasons of malfunction. Is there a lack of commitment or lack of leadership? Involving outsiders in committees, task forces or advisory groups is another way to benefit from skills and perspectives without actually changing the board's size. Executive committees may also facilitate the functioning of a larger board.

References

BoardSource. *Nonprofit Board Answer Book, Second Edition*. BoardSource, Revised 2007.
Available: www.boardsource.org or 800-883-6262.