

Is Bigger Better When It Comes to Board Size?

The answer may surprise you.

By Doug Eadie

There's more art than science in developing a governing board, and you're well advised to be skeptical whenever you come across one of those "golden rules" that abound in the governance field, especially when you hear it espoused with scientific certainty. This is certainly true when you're dealing with the question of board size, which is often the subject of heated debate and considerable passion. One particularly misleading piece of conventional wisdom is that small boards (often defined as under 15 members) are preferable to larger ones.

This fallacious "golden rule" has led many boards to reduce their effectiveness by engaging in needless and damaging downsizing. This isn't to say that a board can't be too large and unwieldy (it's rarely a good idea to have more than 30 board members), but think twice before sliding down the slippery slope of board downsizing without serious forethought.


A board of at least 15 members is preferable to a smaller board in three major ways:

“Think twice before sliding down the slippery slope of board downsizing.”

You can achieve greater diversity. Diverse backgrounds, perspectives, experience, knowledge, and expertise are a major asset in making high-stakes decisions and fashioning policies to deal with complex matters. The more diverse the board, the more likely it will be to raise pertinent questions and avoid marching lock-step to disaster because of an ill-conceived and unchallenged course of action. In today's rapidly changing, challenging world, diversity — especially in terms of ethnicity and gender — is also a major cultural and political asset for any organization that wants widespread public support.

You can expand your access to resources, including money and political support. Many larger boards set aside board seats for critical stakeholders — for example, foundations, government agencies, and sister associations — that are in a position to provide resources. In addition, many board members participate in such functions as speaking for their organization in pertinent forums, testifying before legislative committees, and even lobbying with foundations on behalf of funding applications.



You can achieve the critical mass needed to use standing committees. Well-designed standing committees can make a major contribution to high-impact governing, mainly by dividing the work into manageable "chunks" that let board members deal with issues in greater depth. Standing committee work not only strengthens governing decisions, but builds satisfaction among board members. 



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Resources

Eadie, Doug, "Can Standing Committees Contribute to High-Impact Governing?," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 25, No. 2.

Fox, Mark, "Tools for Improving Your Board's Diversity," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 25, No. 5.

McCrary, Kenneth, "Look Beyond Tradition to Diversify Your Board," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 22, No. 4.

Weisman, Carol, "How Big Should Your Board Be?," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 20, No. 6.

These resources are available at NonprofitWorld.org/members. Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Board Governance (NonprofitWorld.org/LearningInstitute).