

Executive Committee

The role of an executive committee, as of all committees, is to help the board accomplish its work in the most efficient way. Some boards form an executive committee just because everyone else has one -- it seems to exist by default. When creating any committee, it is wise to first analyze the entire structure of the board and determine whether that particular committee would add value. This outline helps boards determine whether an executive committee is a necessary tool for their organization.

What is an executive committee?

As the name implies, an executive committee has special responsibilities and authorities above all committees. Usually an executive committee can act on behalf of the full board. Its main purpose is to facilitate decision making between board meetings or in urgent and crisis circumstances. It often also acts as the communication link to the chief executive and in some cases, performs the chief executive's performance evaluation.

What are the limits of its authority?

Often the role of an executive committee is defined by what it cannot do. To avoid delegating essential powers away from the full board, an *executive* committee should not

- amend bylaws;
- elect or remove board members;
- hire or fire the chief executive;
- approve or change the budget; or
- make major structural decisions (add or eliminate programs, approve mergers or dissolve the corporation).

Who are the members of an executive committee?

It is a common practice to include the officers of the board as members of the executive committee. Usually the board chair also chairs the executive committee meetings. Sizeable boards often elect to add other representatives to this committee to ensure necessary diversity in decision-making and to avoid concentrating too much power in the hands of a few. The size of the committee should stay relatively small in order to keep it a flexible and efficient tool for the board. The chief executive often serves as an *ex-officio* member of this committee.

When would a board benefit from an executive committee?

Here are some situations that might warrant using an executive committee:

- The board is large. A smaller group authorized to act on its behalf in certain circumstances can speed up decision-making.
- Board members are scattered all over the country. It is easier for a core group to get together during an emergency.
- The board regularly needs to take action or make frequent *decisions*. Certain financial and legal matters do not require full board meetings and could easily be attended to by an executive committee.

- The board needs a place to test controversial ideas. An executive committee can be used to study important issues and to present the findings to the full board.

When is an executive committee less beneficial?

- The board is small. Decision-making is already efficient when the full board meets.
- The board is active and motivated. It is easy to get everybody in the meeting room and produce results. All board members are optimally involved.
- The board has no standing committees. All activities are carried out by task forces.

Special concerns

An organization is well served by an executive committee when the committee facilitates the board's time management. However, to keep every board member active and responsible for his or her own participation, pay attention to the following concerns:

- The role of the committee should be defined in the bylaws, not by the committee itself.
- The executive committee cannot replace the full board It reports to and is accountable to the full board.
- Even though the executive committee may be granted special powers in the bylaws, the full board should always confirm decisions in its next meeting.
- The executive committee should not marginalize other board members. If the committee is perceived as an inner clique, outside members easily feel left out, resulting in poor morale.

References

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