



# Can Standing Committees Contribute to High-Impact Governing?



It may sound mundane, but it's at the heart of effective boards.

By Doug Eadie

**T**he topic of board standing committees probably doesn't grab your imagination or send shivers of excitement up and down your spine, but you'd be well advised not to underestimate the powerful contribution they can make to high-impact governing — or the harm poorly designed committees can do. A board can't truly function well without well-designed standing committees.

## Committee Design

The primary job of a board standing committee is to prepare for full

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board meetings, ensuring that informational briefings and action recommendations are ready for full board review and decision-making. To satisfy this important role, a standing committee must meet two criteria:

- **It must be organized along governing — not programmatic or**

**administrative— lines**, corresponding to the flow of governing decisions.

- **Its purview must be organization-wide**, cutting across all programs, functions, and organizational units, thereby enabling the board to exercise “horizontal discipline” in its governing work.

Two committees meet these criteria and are indispensable “governing engines”:

- **Planning** (often called planning and development, or planning and program/business development).

This committee helps the board deal with a wide variety of planning decisions — everything from updating the organization's vision statement to adopting the annual budget.

- **Performance monitoring** (often called performance oversight or management oversight). This committee helps the board assess how well the organization is performing financially, programmatically, and administratively.

You can see that these two committees satisfy the horizontal discipline criterion: Planning covers all planning that your organization does. Performance monitoring oversees all your organization's activities.

Virtually all boards have an executive committee, consisting of board officers and/or the chairs of the other standing committees. The problem with the traditional executive committee is that it is often treated as a mini-board, which screens all information going to the full board, thereby more often than not alienating other board members, who feel less important and out-of-the-loop. Many boards in recent years have turned their executive committee (frequently called the "governance" committee these days) into a committee on board operations, rather than a mini-board, whose primary responsibility is to make sure the board is functioning smoothly as a governing body.

### Some Tried and True Guidelines

The following guidelines — thoroughly tested in practice — have helped standing committees function at a high level in supporting high-impact governing:

- **Every board member** should serve on one and only one standing committee.

- **Only board members** should serve on board standing committees.

- **The standing committees** must be the only path to the full board agenda. This ensures that



committee work is taken seriously and that committees don't become mere discussion groups.

- **All reports at full board meetings** must be made by committee chairs and other committee members, with the sole exception of the CEO's regular report.

- **The CEO should assign a senior executive** to serve as chief staff to each committee, ensuring that the committee is provided with the staff support required to carry out its governing work. ■

### Resources

Brudney, Jeffrey & Vic Murray, "Improving Nonprofit Boards: What Works & What Doesn't?", *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 15, No. 3.

Houle, Cyril, "How Effective Is Your Board? A Rating Scale," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 8, No. 5.

Murray, Vic & Pat Bradshaw, "Core Groups: An Overlooked Key to Board Effectiveness," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 13, No. 3.

*These resources are available at [www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members). Also see the Learning Institute programs on-line: Board Governance ([www.snpo.org/li](http://www.snpo.org/li)).*

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*The author of 16 books on nonprofit leadership, Doug Eadie is the founder and CEO of Doug Eadie & Company, based in Palm Harbor, Florida ([www.DougEadie.com](http://www.DougEadie.com), [DEadiePres@aol.com](mailto:DEadiePres@aol.com)). During the past 20 years, Doug has helped nearly 500 public and nonprofit organizations strengthen the governing capacity of their boards. His newest book is High-Impact Governing in a Nutshell, available through ASAE at 1-888-950-2723 or [www.asaenet.org](http://www.asaenet.org).*

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