

# Term Limits – Yes or No?

It's a crucial question. Use this advice to weigh the pros and cons.

**Q** Our board is discussing a rewrite of our organization's bylaws. A sticking point is the issue of term limits. There are two camps – both vocal. As you can gather, one side wants to adopt term limits, and the other side doesn't. The “yes term limits” group has shared that as many as 70% of nonprofits have adopted term limits. The “no term limits” group insists that term limits work only with organizations with strong social appeal and/or large boards with a waiting list. The “no term limits” group argues that we have a small board that no one wants to join, and we would be cutting off our nose to spite our face, so to speak, if we require turnover. Do you have any thoughts that you could share?

**A** Most boards have this discussion at one point or another. There are valid points on both sides of this issue.

For “no term limits,” the most convincing argument goes like this: Why would you want to force off the board someone who is still committed to your organization and doing an incredible job for you, just because that person has served some arbitrary number of years? (Of course, just because someone's term has expired doesn't mean that the person must leave the scene altogether. There are many options for keeping interested individuals involved, such as putting them on key committees.)

I find the scale weighted more strongly on the “yes term limits” side (though it doesn't necessarily make it right for your organization). The arguments in favor of “yes term limits” include ensuring regular turnover, which allows the organization to bring in the right skills at the right time, as needs and environment change.

Perhaps more important, such turnover ensures a future for the organization. Without turnover, organizations become stagnant. There are no fresh ideas. And, when the current board grows tired of its responsibilities, or when board directors become infirm or die, the organization often fades away due to the lack of incoming leadership.

Few people are going to join an organization that historically has been closed to new directors. Even if people are willing to say yes under such circumstances, the chance of them staying is slight. That's because typically their suggestions will be rejected (“That's not how we do things here.” “We've tried that, and it doesn't work.” “You're new. You don't understand our organization.”)

Of course, there's also the fact that it's easier to remove dead wood from the board when there are term limits, but I find that a weak argument. Boards have a right and

responsibility to hold directors to high standards, and boards that do are exponentially more effective than those that don't. That means speaking with those who are shirking their responsibilities and, if nothing changes, asking them to step down rather than taking the coward's approach and waiting for a term to expire.

It's for these reasons that, according to BoardSource's *Leading with Intent: A National Index of Nonprofit Board Practices* (and other survey results are similar), 71% of organizations have term limits for board directors. The number is consistent, within a few percentage points, regardless of budget size, type of organization (charity, association, foundation, or other) or service area (local, regional, multi-state, national, or international). This reality makes specious the argument of your “no term limits” group – that term limits work only for large boards with waiting lists.

Frankly, I believe your “no term limits” supporters are comfortable – even if subconsciously – having an excuse that allows them to avoid actively recruiting. I guarantee there are many, many people who would love the opportunity to join your board. They may not be the usual suspects. They may not all be able to give large gifts, though I bet there are even some of those out there.

The key is recognizing that you must move beyond your own circles of influence. It may be easier to go back to the same well all the time than to create a year-round recruitment plan and work it; but since you asked my opinion, I believe your organization will be stronger for adopting term limits than not.

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## Keep Your Board Healthy

Whether or not you adopt term limits, you need a strong plan for recruiting and energizing board members. Start with these articles at [NonprofitWorld.org](http://NonprofitWorld.org):

**Tools for Improving Your Board's Diversity** (Vol. 25, No. 5)

**Success through Engaged High-Level Board Members** (Vol. 34, No. 1)

**Action Steps for Effective Governance: Test Yourself** (Vol. 35, No. 3)

**LOP: A Model to Remove Board Members** (Vol. 22, No. 1)