

# Doing Board Committees Right

Here's all you ever wanted to know about board committees, detailed by the foremost expert in the field.

By Terrence Fernsler

## **Nonprofit Board Committees.**

**Edited by Ellen Hirzey. Hardcover. 152 pages. Board Source, [boardsource.org](http://boardsource.org).**

**N**onprofit boards have a far-reaching spectrum of responsibilities. Some of these duties can be delegated. Other tasks may not need full board engagement. (For example, while all board members are encouraged to participate in fundraising, not all need to help plan it.) And some functions may need only temporary task forces. This book explores sub-board groups for these situations and more.

*Nonprofit Board Committees* explains the purposes and ground rules for committees, task forces, and advisory groups. Some committees should consist only of board members because of the important (and frequently confidential) subjects that are their concerns. Others should include non-board volunteers, who will add valuable expertise. Task forces, rather than committees, are recommended when assignments are short-term.

The book explores some common board committees (including the governance, executive, financial, and development committees) in detail. In each case, especially with the executive committee, the book offers cautions about how to delegate powers to them. A growing number of experts advocate for omitting executive committees because they too often usurp responsibilities of the full board. This book explains how to avoid such problems if you do decide to have an executive committee.

Advisory groups sometimes take power that is rightly and legally the governing board's, so a section of the book is devoted to what advisory groups are and are not. The book also provides clarity about the responsibilities of supplementary sub-groups.

Although there's no one-size-fits-all model for a committee structure, the book does lay out a few principles, including:

**Use as few standing committees as possible.** Instead, create committees only when needed, and end them as



“ If every nonprofit uses this book, the sector will be much stronger.”

soon as their job is done. This policy helps ensure the board doesn't delegate the responsibilities reserved to it by law. It also keeps directors from becoming spread too thin over too many committees.

**Consider a zero-based committee structure**, in which each year (or two years at a maximum), the board disbands all committees and starts over with a clean slate. This way, you can be sure that each committee has a significant amount of ongoing, important work to do. If it doesn't, you can get rid of the committee.

**Keep committee structure out of the bylaws** (except for a description of the executive committee, if you have one). Instead, simply say that the board may create and disband committees as needed to support its work.

Writing a book about committees, task forces, and advisory groups that's flexible enough to meet the needs of different nonprofits can be difficult. Fortunately, BoardSource knows the topic extremely well. The book discusses committee structures for nonprofits of a broad range of types, sizes, and ages. In fact, this short book reviews anything one needs to know about sub-board groups helping the board make a difference – and doing it effectively – while staying flexible enough for every nonprofit contingency. If it is used in every nonprofit, the sector will be much stronger. **S**

---

*Terrence Fernsler, MNPL, PhD, has been a nonprofit professional for over 35 years. He is currently an instructor and advisor in the James Madison University Nonprofit Studies minor program ([jmu.edu/academics/undergraduate/minors/nonprofit-studies](http://jmu.edu/academics/undergraduate/minors/nonprofit-studies)).*