

CONSIDERATIONS FOR DETERMINING THE SIZE OF YOUR BOARD

How large should *your* board be? There is no magic number.

Every state defines the minimum number of board members for any corporation, including nonprofit corporations. In most states that number is three. However, boards may be as large as 200. Typically, regardless of the organization, three are too few and 200 are *way* too many for operational effectiveness and efficiency. Boards should be small enough for every board member to play a significant role, yet large enough that you can get the work of the board done. Certainly, the smaller the group, the better able everyone is to really delve into issues and the less likely that anyone will be able to shirk his/her responsibility. However, the larger the group, the more diversity of ideas and the better reach you have into the community. Both conditions are very valuable. Perhaps that speaks to why, according to the BoardSource's *Nonprofit Governance Index 2010*, the average size of boards in the US is 16 and organizations claim that the "sweet spot" is 15 - 22. In my own work, I have found boards of 9 – 15 to be increasingly considered optimum. But I know of numerous organizations that feel strongly that they need 25 – 35 in order to accomplish their goals.

In deciding the number that is right for you, ask yourself the following questions:

- What talents do we require given the goals the board has committed to accomplishing over the next few years?
- To what degree will our organization benefit from diversity on our board? (Note: I prefer to define diversity broadly – e.g., age, gender, geographic location, range of ability/disability, socioeconomic level, learning style and religion, as well as race and ethnicity.)
- To what degree do we require "reach" into the community – the ability to tap different circles of influence for fund raising and/or advocacy purposes?
- Will the proposed number give us the needed range of talent, diversity and reach?
- Will we be able to do the work of the board with the number we are considering, without creating burnout?
- Do we want/need an executive committee? (The trend is to move away from executive committees because they tend to disenfranchise the full board. However, larger boards can be more difficult to convene in times of emergency and may necessitate having one.)
- What are the pros of a board of "X" size? What are the cons?
- Why do we believe this is the right number for us?
- Would a board of a different size be seen as advantageous or detrimental in the greater community? Why?

When you ultimately set the size of your board consider setting it as a range rather than a set number. This will allow you to leave some seats open if you cannot find the "right" people to fill them all at the time of nomination. In addition, if you have an open slot it gives you the ability to jump on someone if you come across the "right" person before current board members' terms expire.