

Governance Models

While the role of all non-profit boards is to act as a public steward by governing the affairs of the organization, different boards carry out this role in a variety of ways. The style of governance often depends upon the size, type and needs of the organization, as well as the philosophy of the board. One governance model is not inherently better for all organizations than other models: each organization's unique situation is likely to lend itself to a particular style of board governance.



Models of board governance have been described in a number of ways. Check out two of the most common, broad categories:

1. Policy Board (See below.)
2. Working Board or Administrative Board (See below.)

Here is a simple distinction between these models. A working board is involved in governing the work, managing the work and doing the work. A policy board is involved in governing the work, it may have some minor involvement in managing the work, usually through committees, and it has no involvement in doing the work.



In reality, most boards are not purely policy boards or working boards: usually they fall somewhere in between these two models. Other models of board governance exist as well. For instance, you may have heard of the "Carver model", which is a variation of the policy board, sometimes referred to as the policy governance board. Some organizations, often small ones involved in equality issues, are governed by a collective model characterized by consensual decision-making and the absence of a hierarchy.

It is important for you to be aware of your board's style of governance in order to know how your role is to be executed, and to stay on track. Awareness of the governance model may also help you to determine whether this is the right volunteer position for you. If you are hoping to get directly involved with the organization's clients or service users, a policy board may not meet your needs. If you only want to be concerned with the organization's "big picture" issues, then a working board may not fit for you.

A governance model provides the board with focus and an established system for making decisions. However, a particular model will not ensure that the board effectively fulfills its role: the individuals who make up the board are just as critical to its success.

Policy Board

- Tends to concern itself primarily with planning, determining the overall direction of the organization, and creating and evaluating major policies.
- Is not so much involved in determining the day-to-day processes or means by which policies are implemented, as in the outcomes, results or ends to be achieved.
- Delegates the responsibility of implementing policies and managing the

organization's daily business to an Executive Director. The Executive Director may, in turn, have a staff of employees and volunteers that deliver the organization's programs or services.

- Is common among medium and large sized not-for-profit organizations with a range of programs or services.
- Must beware of such potential problems as having insufficient planning and policy development skills or interest, overstepping the bounds of its role by getting involved in operational matters, and failing to fulfill its stewardship role by delegating excess authority to the Executive Director..

Working Board or Administrative Board

- Concerns itself with the organization's operations as well as with planning, setting direction and determining and evaluating policies.
- Is involved in many of the practical, day-to-day activities of the organization such as bookkeeping, service delivery, writing grant applications, and so on.
- May or may not have staff to whom some responsibilities are delegated.
- Is common among small, grassroots and single-service not-for-profit organizations.
- Must beware of such potential problems as board member burnout, taking on responsibilities beyond its members' level of skill or expertise, delegating too much of its work to staff, and role confusion with staff members.