

Principles of Advisory Boards

Do You Really Want an Advisory Board?

If run well, an Advisory Board can provide valuable resources and expertise to your organization. However, a poorly run Advisory Board can lead to conflict and a public relations challenge. Clarifying the purpose and structure of your Advisory Board can help everyone to understand their role and how they contribute to the mission of your organization.

Be sure to have a clear purpose for the Advisory Board and to set clear expectations. Remember, organizing an Advisory Board takes time. If the Advisory Board members expect a level of support that you are unable to provide, you risk alienating the very people you are hoping to engage.

Give Them Written Marching Orders

It is important to clarify the role, authority, and expectations of the Advisory Board.

- What are they supposed to produce? Recommendations? Introduction to potential contributors?
- How often should they meet? Annually? As needed? Will they only meet when you require their opinion?
- Who will chair the meetings? Are there any additional positions on the board? How long is their term?

Advisory Boards Advise, They Do Not Direct

The purpose of an advisory board is to provide information, expertise or resources that may otherwise be unavailable to the organization. Members of advisory boards may have specific skills such as legal, marketing or accounting skills. Their name and reputation may lend status to the organization or they may be a group of valued members of the community whose input and resources the organization wishes to cultivate.

Advisory Boards have no inherent authority; they are not the governing body of the organization because they do not represent the “moral owners.” They do not provide oversight (unless this is specifically delegated to them by the Board of Directors, and even then the Board of Directors is accountable for the quality of the oversight).

Boards and Executive Directors Control their Own Advisory Boards

An advisory board may provide advice either to the Board of Directors or to the Executive Director. It is important that both the Board and the Executive Director are able to choose their *own* advisors. Since one of the purposes of an Advisory Board could be to provide opinions as to the standards by which the organization should function, which could reflect on the performance of the Executive Director, the Board must be able to receive independent advice that is not overly influenced by the Executive Director. Similarly, the Executive Director must be able to draw upon her own independent advisors rather than use the specific advisors deemed necessary by the Board. When the Board places specific advisors which the Executive Director must use, it is unclear whether the advisor's opinions are only suggestions or are specific directives. If it is the latter, then the Executive Director cannot be held responsible for poor directives given by a Board-appointed advisory. This reduces the Executive Director's ability to be evaluated for her own decisions.

Consider Branding Advisory Boards Differently

Since the Executive Director and the Board of Directors may have different groups from whom they may seek advice, it may be helpful to call those different groups by different names. An Advisory Board is often used for the group who gives advice to the Board of Directors. The group advising the Executive Director could be called an Advisory Committee, Kitchen Cabinet, Expert Council, or some other creative name.

Choose Members with the Right Qualifications

Understand what you would like the advisory board to accomplish. Should they provide expertise to the Board regarding changes in scientific trends? Do you want them to open doors to potential funders? It is much easier to find the right Advisory Board members when it is clear what they are supposed to accomplish.

Invitation to Join an Advisory Committee

Dear _____,

Your input is valuable to us. Therefore, we would like to invite you to join the Advisory Board of The Association of People Who Join Lots of Groups (APWJLG). The Advisory Board consists of leaders and valuable members of the community who have unique skills to offer. The Advisory Board meets twice a year with subcommittees possibly meeting more often as need. Our desire is to only hold meetings when we have a specific purpose and goal in mind. The Advisory Board provides support to the Board of Directors who maintains the ultimate decision-making authority for the organization. The Advisory Board does not have any oversight duties, however, we would ask for Advisory Board members to be willing to consult with our Executive Director, should she desire your help and expertise.

The responsibilities of Advisory Council members are to:

- Attend at least two meetings per year, each held on a weekday from 8:00 am to 9:45 am.
- Contribute your expertise and thinking to the current and future work of APWJLG
- Be available for four to five telephone calls each year from staff seeking advice
- Allow APWJLG to publish your name as a member of the Advisory Council

In return, APWJLG promises you:

- Two breakfast meetings a year and meetings that start and end on time
- A complimentary APWJLG membership during your term on the Advisory Board
- An appreciation of your time and a commitment not to abuse your time or your generosity
- Advisory Board terms are for two years. Enclosed are a roster of current Advisory Board members, and a schedule of meetings for the coming year.

One of us will be calling you within the next few days to answer your questions and to give you a personal invitation to join the Advisory Board. Thank you, and we look forward to talking with you.



Barry Diamond is an expert in Policy Governance[®], the most important contribution to Boards of Directors in the past forty years. Trained in the nationally-known Policy Governance Academy, Barry has been strengthening organizations by improving their Board and empowering their Executive Director. Barry understands the process of working with boards as a part of the management, president and principle change-agent for a national professional organization, and governance consultant. He can be reached at info@TheSandbarGroup.com • 972-392-1200.