Program Advisory Committees

An advisory committee is comprised of volunteers who convene periodically to reflect upon some aspect of your organization and who provide input, support and recommendations with the goal of program enhancement. These advisory committees, sometimes referred to as advisory boards, councils or task forces, do not have formal legal responsibilities. As you launch your new project, you may wish to consider forming an advisory committee, as they can be “idea engines,” providing valuable advice about ways in which your project can best serve the local community.

Formulate the Design and Purpose

Advisory committees typically perform the functions of technical assistance, assessment of a program’s impact, and public advocacy. Before reaching out to prospective members, clarify the purpose and design of your advisory committee.

Distinguish between the role of an advisory committee and a governing board.

• The governing board is an organization’s legal, governing body that considers management, performance, financial, and legal issues. The key distinction between these two bodies is that an advisory committee advises and a governing board decides.

Select a formal or informal advisory committee model.

A formal advisory committee abides by the arrangements of a written charter. Charters provide an opportunity to clarify the primary purpose and functions of the committee through the following means:

• Identify areas of needed expertise and advice.
• Present organization or program’s mission statement and program.
• Explain responsibilities, activities, and limits on authority.
• Outline frequency of meetings. (Advisory committees commonly meet on a monthly or quarterly basis depending on the needs of the program.)
• Reference committee member perquisites (e.g., reimbursement of travel costs).

Share your charter with prospective members. See the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program or the Governor’s Interagency Council on Health Disparities for additional examples of advisory committee charters.

You may elect to establish an informal advisory committee, which is a group of independent advisors who you can call upon, to guide you in their particular areas of expertise. In this case, your advisory committee may rarely or never formally meet, but is a means of recognizing the contributions of individuals who regularly advise staff and/or the board. Clarify member responsibilities and through what means and how frequently you expect to contact them.

Determine if your advisory committee is standing or ad hoc.

• For ongoing, major activities (e.g., lasting a year or more) consider establishing a standing advisory committee.
• For short-term activities (e.g., 1-12 months), consider establishing an ad hoc advisory committee.

For a standing advisory committee, decide whether to establish a fixed duration of service and terms. This might encompass:

• establishing a minimum length of volunteer service.
• staggering committee terms among members, so not all terms expire at the same time.
• indicating conditions that would warrant disqualification from the committee.
• developing procedures for communicating volunteer milestones.
• recognizing anniversaries and service culmination.
Devise Committee Membership

Committee members can be a sustained source of quick, practical advice. Once familiar with your organization, they do not need to be apprised of every detail when brainstorming solutions. Committee members should have an insider’s perspective so they can point out unexpected possibilities and hidden hazards associated with your project. Their association also goes a long way toward community acceptance of a new or expanded organization. Recruiting a “heavyweight” to your committee can give you credibility, but it is important to ensure that you have members who are able to invest the time to give you thoughtful advice or are well-connected and willing to make introductions.

Develop criteria for inclusion, for example:

• desired skills and expertise;
• diversity reflective of the population served (e.g., race; gender; residency);
• position and standing in the community;
• willingness to be publicly identified and associated with the nonprofit;
• widespread availability and accessibility for committee functions; and
• keen problem solving and communication skills.

Determine an appropriate recruitment strategy.

Organizations adopt a range of methods for recruiting members to advisory committees. These include:

• soliciting formal nominations from stakeholder groups;
• seeking informal recommendations from well-connected people and those affiliated with the organization;
• making internal staff choices to invite the participation of key community members, partner organizations, and/or relevant planning bodies; and
• inviting a consumer of your services, providing a unique and invaluable perspective.

Compose a personalized invitation.

• A written invitation to join an advisory committee will clarify the terms and conditions of the prospective opportunity and is more likely to elicit a definitive response.
• The invitation may include the committee’s function, the basis for the invite to the addressee, potential benefits to the addressee, frequency of meetings and probable workload.

Get Down to Work

Plan and conduct productive committee meetings.

• Once you have confirmed your advisory members, it is time to plan your first meeting.
• Run meetings as you would a formal two to three hour board meeting. For example, send out materials three days in advance, briefly address administrative matters at the beginning of the meeting, provide breaks and refreshments, keep slides to a minimum, delve deeply into one topic per board meeting, and conclude each discussion with a specific, stated action plan.
• If the committee is going to discuss issues that include private information, members should be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement.
• The minutes of the meeting should be taken by someone who does not need to participate fully because listening and contributing are a full-time job. If you don’t have someone to serve as a secretary, ask permission of your committee members to tape the meeting so you can compose the minutes later. Email minutes within two weeks to all members.

Incorporate members into your program’s ongoing communication.

• Create a link on your website with photos and brief bios of members of your advisory committee.
• Set up an e-mail list for monthly or quarterly summaries (10 bullet points maximum) regarding advisory committee activities.
• Inform the advisory committee about how their contribution fits into the project strategy and outcomes.
Conclusion

Overall, advisory committees are most productive when members are provided clarity about their purpose, roles and scopes; the member selection process is thoughtful, not haphazard; and the committee is neither underutilized, allowed to overstep its boundaries, or outlive its specified purpose.

RESOURCES

- Authenticity Consulting
  Guidelines to form a nonprofit advisory board

- Blue Avocado: What is an Advisory Board and Should We Have One?
  http://www.blueavocado.org/node/567

- Mentoring Resource Center: Building an Effective Advisory Committee
  http://educationnorthwest.org/webfm_send/232

- Nonprofit Navigator: Advisory Boards
  http://www.nonprofit-knowhow.com/1/category/advisory%20boards/1.html

- National Service Knowledge Network: Recruiting for an advisory council
  http://www.nationalserviceresources.org/practices/17527

- Stengel Solutions: Ten Tips to Creating an Effective Advisory Board

- Role of Advisory Board in a Nonprofit
  http://smallbusiness.chron.com/role-advisory-board-nonprofit-22596.html