



Guide to NFP Advisory (i.e., Non-Governing) Groups

Many nonprofit organizations of a certain size have some form of advisory group. They are often called advisory councils or perhaps even advisory boards. Some are referred to as honorary boards. The term “advisory group” is used in what follows.

Purpose of an Advisory Group

When the word “board” is used in the title, it is meant to elevate the group’s status, but rarely does an advisory group have any legal or fiduciary responsibility. An advisory group typically serves one or more of the following functions:

1. luster (a recognizable name on the letterhead signaling endorsement of the organization);
2. clout (the person is ready to be called upon for some specific, limited purpose, e.g., gaining access);
3. advice, usually on special matters, notably fundraising or strategic planning;
4. recognition for past generosity (or motivation for a future gift)
5. affording continued but reduced involvement with the organization, e.g., for former board members;
6. less often, an advisory group is used as a training or testing ground for prospective board members.

The “contract” between the advisory group member and the organization usually entails an understanding that the member will stay informed about the organization, in particular, its mission, activities, accomplishments, and future plans. Usually there is also an understanding that the time required of the advisory group member will be limited, somewhere between zero (but see below) and what might be asked of an actual board member.

Keys to a Successful Advisory Group

First, decide if an advisory group is worth it. Forming and maintaining an advisory group involves time and effort, in particular, on the part of the CEO and, occasionally, the board chair. Activities include recruitment, orientation, communications, and meetings. There is no such thing as a zero-maintenance advisory group.

Second, the advisory group’s purpose, functions, and expectations must be clear both to the organization and to the group. Moreover, they should be limited: It is possible to form an advisory group that embraces as many as five of the functions listed above, but it is highly unlikely that such a group will do a good job at any one of them.

Third, develop a plan, based on the objectives discussed above, for recruiting, engaging, and getting results from the advisory group. Think carefully about the time required. Don’t assume that, because advisory group members don’t complain about the meetings not held or cultivation contacts not carried out, they will stay engaged and ready to help when needed. What you do with the group when you don’t need it is important. The plan should address the following elements:

- Charge or mission
- Criteria for membership
- Expectations of members
- Recruitment
- Orientation
- Communications and continuing education
- Cultivation (informal contacts)
- Meetings (formal contacts)
- Recognition

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