



How Much Should Your Nonprofit Board Be Involved in Management?

Policy-Making Versus Management Activities?

Experts often frame the question in terms of how much Board members should be attending to establishing top-level plans and policies versus how much Board members should be involved in management, that is, in actually implementing those plans and policies.

First, it is helpful to recognize that there are different levels of policy in organizations, as listed below. A policy is a set of guidelines that can guide the behaviors of others in a certain area or practice, including for them to generate more detailed policies or procedures.

1. **Strategic (top-level) policies**
These affect the entire organization and how it is integrated with other organizations, for example, the organization’s mission, vision, values and strategic goals. Strategic policies direct and guide the management activities in the organization.
2. **Management / functional policies**
These guide the activities in major functions and operations, for example, Boards, strategic planning, staffing, programs, finances, fundraising and evaluations.
3. **Program policies**
These guide how programs operate, for example, how clients first come into the program, how they receive services and how services are evaluated.
4. **Day-to-day policies and procedures**
These are detailed sets of directions, for example, what to do in case of fire, how to ensure that there is always a sufficient amount of office supplies, etc.

Factors That Influence Focus of Board Members’ Involvement

Experts on nonprofits often have very strong beliefs and feelings about what should be the extent of involvement of Board members in top-level policy making versus implementing those policies in the day-to-day affairs of the nonprofit. They usually assert that Board members should attend primarily to top-level policies. However, various factors influence how involved Board members are in policy making versus “management,” that is, in implementing the policies.

- New and small nonprofits often have hands-on Board members who are heavily involved in day-to-day activities because the nonprofits have no staff or very little in staff resources.



To understand Board priorities for each life cycle of the nonprofit, see “How to Match Board’s Priorities to Life Cycle of Nonprofit” **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

- Larger, established nonprofits usually have members who attend primarily to top-level planning and policies because those nonprofits have adequate resources in staffing to effectively implement top-level policies.

- If Board members have little confidence in the CEO, there have been frequent operational problems, or the CEO is leaving the organization, then Board members often are highly involved in management affairs, at least temporarily.
- Very autocratic cultures usually place strong value on respecting the role of top-level leaders, in which case Board members would be perceived as being on a rather superior level and probably not involved in management affairs.
- Very egalitarian cultures that value equal treatment, value and participation of people might perceive Board members and the clients of the nonprofit to have equal influence in the affairs of the nonprofit, in which case members and others would have similar roles.
- If a nonprofit has been struggling to work toward clear mission and priorities, then Board members (who had previously been focused primarily on the activities of management) should probably focus much more on policy making – thereby ensuring more clear mission and priorities that can be conveyed to all members of the organization.

Regardless of the model chosen by the Board, the nonprofit has to be sure that certain strategic decisions are always made and certain questions are always addressed.



See “Typical Types of Decisions Your Board Should Make” **Error! Bookmark not defined.** and “Questions Your Board Members Should Always Ask” **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

For Board and staff members who prefer that Board members have some involvement in management (for example, in nonprofits that are new, small or have cultures of egalitarian participation), perhaps that level of involvement is successful as long as the Board is “healthy”. (See the following section about what “healthy” might look like.)



For more information, see “Sample Comparison of Board and Staff Roles” **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
