

# Best Practices for Nonprofit Advisory Boards

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While there is a clear definition and set of practices for corporate and nonprofit boards, the practices for an advisory board are quite subjective. The function of an advisory board typically depends on the needs of the organization.

In general, advisory boards are a less formal group than a governing board of directors, and they usually serve on a volunteer basis. Individually and collectively, they tend to have expertise and specific industry knowledge that the governing board doesn't have and may need at times.

Advisory boards can take [different forms](#) based on their purpose. Some types of advisory boards include:

- Collective
- Policy board
- Young professionals
- Consultancy
- Working board
- Fundraising board
- Managing or executive board
- [Fiscal sponsor](#)

Nonprofit boards may form advisory boards for their expertise, their willingness to make donations or both. Celebrities and other people with credibility to nonprofit boards and who can encourage donors and the general public to lend financial support for their cause.

## Best Practices for Nonprofit Advisory Boards

Nonprofit governing boards have much flexibility in forming [best practices](#) for their advisory board. The primary decision about forming an advisory board is to come to a consensus on the advisory board's purpose. From there, the governing board can develop best practices that are prudent and sensible.

## Identify the Function of the Advisory Board

Advisory board members are essentially [mentors](#). The mentoring functions of advisory board members typically fall into one of three categories:

1. [Industry mentors](#) – consultants who have large networks within the industry and who have credentials and seasoned expertise, within the industry.
2. [Company-building mentors](#) – consultants or mentors who have built companies as start-ups and who can assist governing boards with the business and leadership aspects of running an organization.

3. *Personal mentors* – mentors who serve a similar function to a life or business coach, whereby they work with board members to develop their knowledge of governance and help them recognize and use their talents to advance the organization's mission.

An important first step is for the governing board to identify the advisory board's function. The next best step is to make sure that the advisory board knows exactly what the governing board expects of them. A governing board can accomplish this by developing a written description of the advisory board's purpose and offering it to them in writing.

## Scope, Concept and Nature of the Advisory Board

To avoid disagreements and disappointment, governing boards need to be clear about the duties and responsibilities that they require from the advisory board. They should be clear about whether the board will be calling on them individually as needed or whether the advisory board will hold meetings of their own. They should give clear instructions about how many meetings they need to have, which may be monthly, quarterly, annually or informally as needed.

There's no standard for how many members should be on an advisory board. Governing boards can decide how many is appropriate. Since the advisory board won't be voting on issues, it doesn't matter whether the total number of members is odd or even. A good size for a working group is about eight members.

Advisory boards that will be holding meetings should appoint a board chair to facilitate them.

## Don't Set It and Forget It

It will take some effort to form an advisory committee. It takes less attention to keep it going, but boards need to remember that they need to stay involved and connected with the advisory board in addition to performing their governing board duties.

An [advisory board](#) can enhance an organization by introducing board members to key contacts. When networking is the advisory board's purpose, the governing board needs to follow through and be sure to pursue opportunities for expanding their base of donors and philanthropists.

Remember that your governing board chose the members of the advisory board because they have a wealth of experience, knowledge and expertise. Governing boards would be remiss to appoint such a prestigious team to the advisory board and not make use of their talents to help grow and advance the cause of the mission.

Don't forget to express your appreciation and thanks to the advisory board for their input and assistance. It's important to be cognizant that they are also volunteers and that their time is valuable.

# Weigh the Effort of Forming and Sustaining an Advisory Board Against Opportunities and Challenges

Nonprofit board members are often stretched for time in their service to the board. An advisory board adds value to the organization, but it may bring as many **challenges** as opportunities. Before following through with forming an advisory board, nonprofit governing boards need to be sure that they have the human resources to be able to integrate and oversee the advisory board in order to make their efforts worthwhile.

## Final Tips on Best Practices for Nonprofit Organizational Advisory Boards

Advisory board members are often easier to recruit than governing board members. Look for potential advisory members among former board members who may want to remain involved with the organization. Recruits who failed to attain a seat on the current board may also be good candidates to serve on an advisory board. Interns, college students and other young people who have a connection to your cause also often make valuable advisory board members.

Advisory boards are likely to be less cohesive in their thinking and philosophies than governing boards, whose members have been well-acquainted for a long time. In taking advice from and consulting with an advisory board, it's important to consider the opinions and guidance from all of them. If there are too many conflicting opinions, take the issue back to the board so they can revisit it. Governing boards can then initiate discussions to sort out the various pieces of information in order to make good decisions. Be aware that advisory board members may be giving general advice. Be careful to apply their advice as it pertains to the proper context of the situation.

Nonprofit governing boards will get the best value from their efforts in forming an advisory board when they take the time to utilize them for their agreed-upon, stated purposes.

<https://www.boardeffect.com/blog/best-practices-for-nonprofit-advisory-boards/>