

GOVERNANCE IN AN ALL-VOLUNTEER ORGANIZATION

When there are no staff to delegate to

By Trina Isakson

Most board governance resources stress the importance of separating governance from operations: board members are responsible for governance; staff are responsible for management and operations.

Governance: vision and mission, high-level strategy, legal and ethical responsibilities, organizational and board health—today and for the future

Operations: implementing programs, marketing and communications, human resources, accounting, etc.

But what about when there are no staff?

I propose that boards delegate operations largely to volunteers.

What do other experts think?

Nonprofit Quarterly raised this issue in the 2013 article *What Staff? Keeping Operations and Governance Separate in an Organization with No Staff*.

Author Mitch Dorger describes the magnetic-like attraction that boards often have for operational issues: “If they are allowed to, operational activities will take over the board’s agenda and leave little or no time for important governance matters.” Operations are fun because it’s “where the action is.” However, when boards spend most of their time on operations, organizations risk their long-term health.

Dorger describes a few possible ways that all-volunteer organizations can separate governance from operations.

- **Meeting agenda separation:** Divide meetings up into time for governance and operations either within meetings, or by holding separate meetings for governance and operations.
- **Committee structure:** Develop board committees that each address governance (e.g. finance, governance, strategy) or operations (divided by program/operational area) so that board members are involved in both, but in separate ways.
- **Separate boards:** Have two boards of directors – one focused on governance, the other on operations.
- **Board role divisions:** Update role descriptions so that different board members have different responsibilities related to governance and/or operations

About the author



Trina Isakson is founder and principal thinker at 27 Shift (27shift.com) and leads research and strategy projects that challenge assumptions of how people contribute positively to society. She also teaches a variety of university courses on sustainable development and nonprofit leadership and management.

Trina is a sought out thought leader in volunteer and employee engagement, community-university engagement, inter-generational dynamics, women and leadership, introverts, and innovations in nonprofit sector governance and leadership.

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Q: Without staff, a board has to do operations too, right?

A: Not necessarily.

The board that does everything – governance and operations – is often referred to as a **working board**. Working boards often focus most exclusively on operations, which can result in burnout, legal risk, and a lack of thought put into the future.

I argue that not only must boards of all-volunteer organizations focus on governance, they may be able to delegate responsibility for operations—not to staff or contractors—but to volunteers external to the board of directors.

Governance and operations structural models for all-volunteer organizations

In the following sections I share visual representations of how boards and other volunteers can organize themselves to address both governance and operational requirements of an organization.

I go on to compare the three models with respect to features, benefits, drawback, meeting design, etc.

Beyond structure

While structure is important, the only way to truly ensure success is to also address the related assumptions and beliefs held by board members. The board of directors must believe that:

1. Governance activities are crucial to the organization's long term health and success.
2. An operational role (e.g. doing social media, organizing events) is a sufficient responsibility of a board member.
3. There is an abundance of people who are willing to serve in volunteer leadership roles, they just need to be provided the right opportunities, autonomy and trust, and clear expectations.
4. Experimentation, growth, and learning are healthy and important to organizational vitality.

Note

The committee and positions listed in the diagrams below are examples only. Each organization is unique and will have different operational needs (and different ways to organize their governance responsibilities).

THREE POSSIBLE STRUCTURAL MODELS THAT FOLLOW

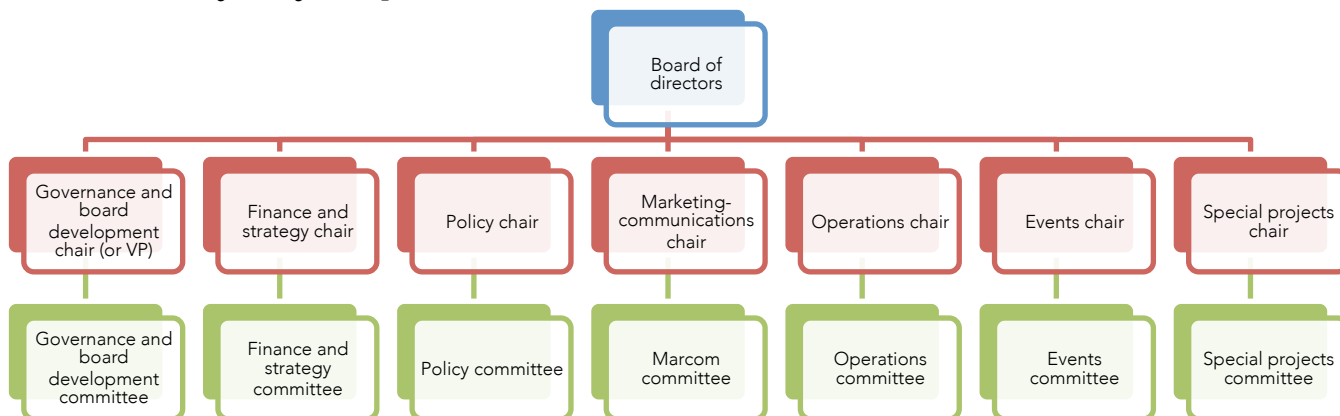
Option 1: Full committee structure

Option 2: One operational committee

Option 3: Volunteer executive director

Option 1: Full committee structure

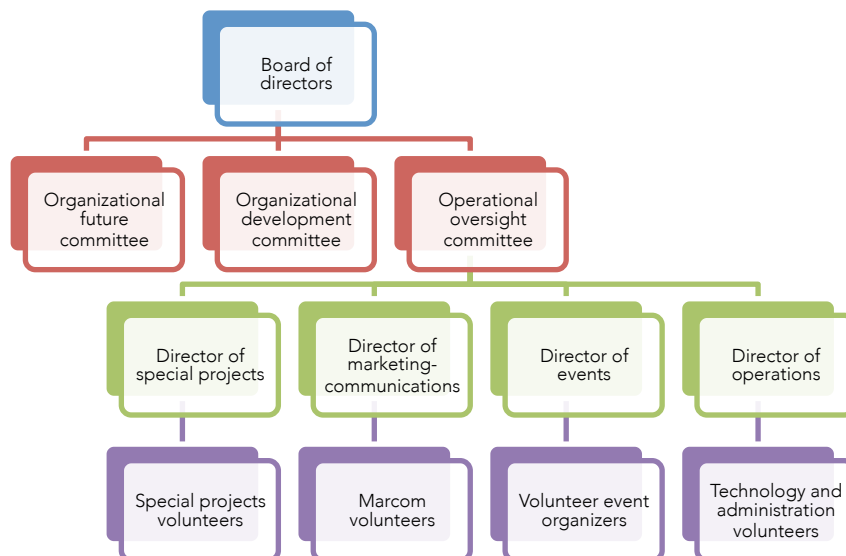
In this example, the board consists of a series of governance and operational committees, each led by a board member. The committees consist of a mix of board members and non-board volunteers. In this manner, board members are responsible for governance and management, but the committees and their members actually carry out operations.



Option 2: One operational committee

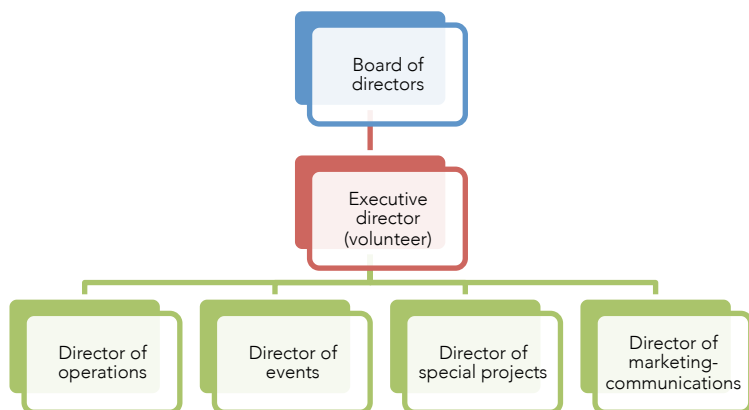
In this example, there are two (or more) committees focused on governance, and only one committee is focused on operational oversight.

Each of these committees can involve a mix of board members and external volunteers. Because of the breadth of work the operational committee is responsible for, it will likely involve more external volunteers that board members. Lead volunteers take on specific areas of operations within the operational committee.



Option 3: Volunteer executive director

In this example, the structure is very similar to one with paid staff, except the “staff” – the executive director, directors, etc. are volunteers. There are opportunities for operational committees, but everything “operational” reports to the board through the volunteer executive director. The executive director is a management position, responsible for facilitating the work of additional lead volunteers.



Comparison

	FULL COMMITTEE STRUCTURE	ONE OPERATIONAL COMMITTEE	VOLUNTEER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Features	Board members take individual responsibility for leading specific governance and operational areas.	Board members take responsibility for mostly governance. Only one committee focused on operations.	All operations delegated to volunteers via a volunteer executive directors (like an operations chair).
Ideal for	A working board that wants to ensure governance isn't forgotten, and is early stages of growth.	An organization that wants to focus more on growth, but wants to stay close to operations for now.	An organization with high levels of trust, clarity, and an ability to delegate authority. An organization that is growing into the possibility of having a paid coordinator.
Focus of board	Governance, and managing operations.	Governance. Limited focus on operations.	Governance. Operations fully delegated.
Benefits	Board gets to stay close to operations. High level of control.	Opportunities for external volunteer involvement in leadership capacities.	Board can focus almost exclusively on governance. Wide range of opportunities for external volunteer involvement in leadership capacities.
Drawbacks	Board members carry a lot of responsibility. Few formal leadership roles for non-board members.	Board members may feel removed from operations, and therefore perhaps the work they enjoy the most.	Board members may feel removed from operations, and therefore perhaps the work they enjoy the most. A lot rides on finding the right volunteer to be executive director (a leader who is good at facilitating the work of others).
Types of board members required	People who can think with a visionary and strategic lens and who are willing/able to work with others to get stuff done.	Mostly people who are able to focus on governance, with a few who also are interested in operations.	People who are willing to let go of the day-to-day operations and who want to focus on governance, vision, strategy and legal responsibilities.
How to grow the organization's work	Add new board members, or increase the number of responsibilities for individual board members (watch for burnout!).	Add members to the operational oversight committee or increase the responsibilities for individual committee members (watch for burnout!).	Add more directors to report to the executive director (watch for burnout!). Executive director may eventually become paid role.
What board meetings looks like	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operational updates for information (and discussion/decision only if necessary). Governance items for discussion/decision/action. Additional meetings or communication occurs at committee levels. How much autonomy and authority the board gives to committees and volunteers will impact the types of discussions at board meetings. 		

Resources

Dorger, Mitch. (2013, September 27). What Staff? Keeping Operations and Governance Separate in an Organization with No Staff. Nonprofit Quarterly. Available at:

<https://www.nonprofitquarterly.org/governancevoice/22970-what-staff-keeping-operations-and-governance-separate-in-an-organization-with-no-staff.html>.

Kelly, C., and Gerty, L. (2013). The Abundant Not-for-Profit: How talent (not money) will transform your organization. Available for purchase at: <http://thevantagepoint.ca/content/abundant-not-profit>

The Abundant Not-for-Profit originated from a professional development and capacity building organization for nonprofit leaders called Vantage Point. They offer a variety of resources, workshops, and webinars on topics such as governance and working with volunteers operating in highly-skilled capacities. <http://thevantagepoint.ca>