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## July 15, 2010: How Many Committees?

This is an enduring question because most board and staff leaders insist on a static structural rather than a functional answer. [If your bylaws specify the existence of many committees, then you will strive to operate all of those committees. It is usually better to mention the power to create committees in bylaws rather than specify a set of committees.] The only meaningful answer is to thoughtfully address another pair of questions: 1) How many committees do you need and 2) How many committees can you effectively support? Especially for organizations with limited boards and staff to support them, it doesn't make much sense to have lots of committees because only a few committees can be formed that can meet an adequate number of times with adequate staff support.

How do you figure out how many committees are needed? A simple approach is to create a pile of potential committee work topics from two sources.

First, go back to basic board responsibilities and you will find at least ten depending upon which standard list you use. Second, think about major strategic challenges the organization is facing and significant operational issues where board guidance is needed. Next, divide the big pile of topics into thematic groupings and see how many little piles you now have. These smaller piles can serve as the foundation or point of focus for a committee.

For newer, smaller or less functional organizations, it is highly recommended that you start with just two committees, one focused on general guidance, board-building and oversight issues ("governance") and one focused on outward facing promotional, communication and fund raising issues ("development"). Once the motivation and capacity evolves to manage more than two committees, you can always create more, if your bylaws allow for this (and they should or can be easily adjusted for this purpose). What is important, is not how many committees there are but whether the important work that is best performed by committees is being accomplished.