

Balancing diverse perspectives with board size



The standard answer to “What size board should we have?” is, it depends. A board needs to be:

- Small enough to make group decisions effectively;
- Small enough to be affordable to bring together for the desired meeting frequency;
- Large enough to get the board work done (officers, committee chairs, participation in advocacy and fundraising, time for new directors to get comfortable taking on officer and committee chair roles);
- Large enough to bring diversity to the decision-making.

Let’s focus on that last one since I think it’s the most misunderstood. Research shows decisions will generally be significantly better, though sometimes slower, if members of a group bring diverse relevant life experiences, skills and knowledge. The life experiences will arise from differences in gender, colour, ethnic and geographic origin, socio-economic class, sexual orientation, physical ability, age and especially personal experience of self and close family members. Which ones matter most depend on the mission of the organization. For example, a charity dealing with violence against women obviously needs a board that includes women who have experienced violence.

What knowledge matters? One knowledge area is the community being served.

An association community might consist of members of a particular profession. Member perspectives will differ depending on how recently they were educated, whether they are self-employed or employees, whether they practice in rural or urban areas, what size organization they are part of and how close they are to retirement. In Canada national associations also often struggle to ensure they have good directors from across the nation.

Such association considerations are very different from a board that seeks diverse perspectives within a geographic community or ethnic group. I consulted with the South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario long ago, where a single skin colour most certainly didn’t mean a single family history, country of origin or ancestral origin, language, religion or political views. Organizations now seeking to address Truth and Reconciliation

Commission recommendations relevant to their work cannot expect any one individual to be familiar with all the Indigenous peoples of Canada.

Of course you would also be seeking skills and knowledge that every board needs, such as financial and risk oversight. You might also need skills and knowledge very specific to your mission, again possibly obtained through diverse life experiences as well as formal education.

So trying to fill every niche in a diversity matrix could leave you with a board of 65—I've seen it—that is unlikely to be effective, engaged and making timely decisions. Most boards, at least those that have reviewed governance in the last twenty years, seem to be around seven to fifteen, twenty at the outside. That doesn't allow for a full diversity at the decision-making table.

How do we find balance? What are the options that keep a board size functional? I will suggest six that you could consider, likely in some combination:

1. ***Establish one or a few advisory councils.*** Identify key groups the board needs to hear from frequently before making decisions that particularly affect them. Provide support for representatives of those groups to meet, in person or online, to consider draft proposals and to develop their own initiatives and questions. Ensure their input is provided to the board as is, without staff filters.
2. ***Create defined space on the board for people from key groups.*** Many bylaws give authority to key stakeholders to appoint a person to the board; I've particularly seen this in faith-based organizations. In one organization I served, we created three advisory councils to help get member approval to take the organization from 50 directors to 13. Those councils each elected their own chair, and the new bylaws gave those chairs board seats. The new bylaws got approval because more members trusted that someone who understood them, and was one of them, would have a voice and vote at the smaller board table. Some cautions, learned the hard way:
 - Ensure the bylaws say those chairs are subject to the same maximum number of terms as other directors;
 - Provide director orientation and education that stresses that once they are on the board, they are governing the whole organization not “representing” the council or speaking for everyone in that demographic.
3. ***Open up the board meetings.*** Invite your community in—anything that has to be private can be done In Camera. Invite those who wish to speak to an issue to let the Chair know in advance, and, time permitting, invite comments during discussions. Creating the Future is an example of a charity that provides live video of its meetings and monitors tweets during the meetings for useful suggestions.
4. ***Create non-voting positions*** for selected or elected individuals who are entitled to participate in the meetings. This approach can be particularly useful for

organizations serving young people. It not only gives them a voice before they are old enough for board service, but also helps develop them as leaders and volunteers.

5. ***Ensure appropriate external consultations*** have taken place for the item comes forward for a decision. Include information about the nature of the consultations, and explain how the voices of everyone relevant were respectively heard. For example, an online survey might be fine for business folks, but not for newcomers to Canada still trying to learn English and without affordable access to the Internet. And single parents working two jobs and using transit might not find your meeting times and locations convenient.
6. ***Make staff diversity a priority objective*** for the CEO or Executive Director. If the decision and discussion documents coming to the board have been prepared by a diverse staff team, that improves the chances that diverse perspectives will have been considered in the analysis and recommendations. However, staff members are human and cannot be without biases, often towards protecting existing programs and services or making the changes they deem needed. Those are not always the ones that best serve the mission or those who are to benefit; boards exist to take that broader perspective. Staff diversity alone is not sufficient.

Given the propensity of the not-for-profit sector to innovate, I am certain readers have other success stories to share about bringing diverse voices into board decision-making!