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Advisory Volunteers

by Susan J. Ellis

From *Appeared as an "On Volunteers" column in The NonProfit Times*

There are many reasons why an agency might want to develop an advisory body, separate from its board of directors. Some are: to gain the input and support of key community leaders; to keep long-time supporters and past board members involved; to assure that decisions have been weighed from as many perspectives as possible. Funding sources or government regulations may also mandate the formation of a community advisory group, often also requiring some of the seats to be filled by ex officio representatives.

Your reasons for seeking advisors will affect your goals for their productivity. You may be satisfied to have your advisory body be an honorary entity with few responsibilities beyond allowing the names of the members to be printed on the agency's letterhead. But if you hope for a more functional advisory group, you must structure the process for success.

Just because you have formed an "advisory" group does not mean that anyone in your agency wants advice--or will act on it! Take the time to define the role of the advisory body, its relationship to your board of directors, and what it is not expected to do. Do not imply power when there is none. Most advisory groups have an impact through influence and persuasion, but do not have decision-making authority.

For this reason it is best to avoid the word "board" when naming your advisory body. When someone is recruited to join an "Advisory Board," authority is implied even if not intended. Titles such as "Advisory Council" or "Community Leadership Task Force" are more accurate and less confusing to distinguish the group from your true board of directors.

Recruiting Members

As with any volunteer endeavor, it is useful to clarify expectations with a written job description of the role of an advisory council member. Even if there is little work to be done, be honest about your desire to use the person's name on your agency's behalf. Give the prospective volunteer the option of taking a more active role in some way.

Are you recruiting individuals or the positions they presently fill? For example, if you recruit the president of the local Public Relations Society, does that person remain on your advisory council after leaving office or does the next president take over?

Be careful about mixing honorary advisors with working advisors. If you need a "home" for big donors, form a "Special Friends Circle" but keep it distinct from the group you want to assist you with, say, legal compliance issues.

Eliciting Advice

If you have made the effort to form an advisory council, put it to good use. Schedule meetings sparingly, but always with a specific agenda. Your goal is to generate as much discussion as possible, but not necessarily to reach consensus. You have recruited these volunteers because they represent diverse constituencies--so why would you expect them to agree on everything? In fact, despite majority opinion, you should listen carefully to the concerns of the minority. Those who dissent on an issue may be expressing the very things you most need to factor into your decision-making.

Never take a vote in an advisory council meeting. Again, this incorrectly implies the power to decide something. But it also suppresses the dissenting voices. Instead of trying to distill all the volunteers' perspectives into one, try such techniques as:

- have members list all the pros and cons of any idea under discussion;
- ask them to generate all the questions they can think of in reaction to a particular issue (sometimes a provocative question is better than a recommendation);
- be sure the minutes reflect the dissenting opinions (if the Supreme Court can do it, so can your advisory council);
- spend time on identifying community resources that might assist with a particular project, since it is that expanded knowledge base you hoped to tap by recruiting these advisors.

In most situations, you want the benefit of the council's collective and individual thinking to add to the ultimate decision-making of the board of directors or the administrative staff. Be sure to provide feedback on what action was finally taken and how the council's input was used.

Advisors as Individuals

It is wasteful to ask advisory volunteers to limit their service to attendance at meetings. Each advisor has a special point of view and important data to share.

Consider asking advisor volunteers to help your agency in two distinct ways: participate in one or two yearly meetings of the full advisory council, and spend a few hours consulting with you one-to-one. In these individual contacts by phone or in person, you can gain the insight and information you need most.

When advisors begin to offer input on their own initiative, you will be getting the most benefit from these special volunteers.

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