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[Board Cafe](#) ^[1] • By Jan Masaoka • August 23, 2010 • [Email](#) ^[2] [Print](#) ^[3]



Recently several Blue Avocado readers have written to say their organizations are considering creating advisory boards or advisory committees of one kind or another. At the same time, others write to ask how to disband troublesome or obsolete advisory committees. Here are some guidelines for advisory committees, as well as a sample letter inviting an individual to join such a group:

The board of directors of a nonprofit organization is its legal, governing body. In contrast, an advisory board does not have any formal legal responsibilities. Rather, an advisory board is convened by the organization to give advice and support.

Probably the most common experience nonprofits have with advisory boards is that they invite people successfully onto such a board, and then fail to have that board accomplish much of anything. So it's worth a few minutes to consider the options for doing it right, and even whether to do it at all.

There are four common types of nonprofit advisory boards, illustrated in the following examples:

- **Fundraising:** Organization W wants to invite prospective donors onto some kind of official body, but it doesn't think these individuals would be good board members. In some cases the individuals probably don't have the time or interest, and others are not seen as being appropriate (for a variety of reasons) for the board. By creating an advisory board, W hopes to engage donors in a little advice-giving and a lot of donating and fundraising.
- **Programmatic:** Organization X, in contrast, has a board comprised mostly of wealthy board members who see their role as primarily one of fundraising. But most of the board members are not well connected to the low-income client population, nor are they experts in AIDS -- the work of the organization. As a result, X convened an advisory board composed of low-income clients, social workers, and medical personnel. The advisory board meets four times a year to give input, to react to ideas from staff, and to make suggestions. Several staff and board members attend each meeting. For example, the last advisory board meeting focused on developing a policy around case management for dual-diagnosed clients. X has also convened a Youth Advisory Board. Other advisory groups might include a Disabled Access

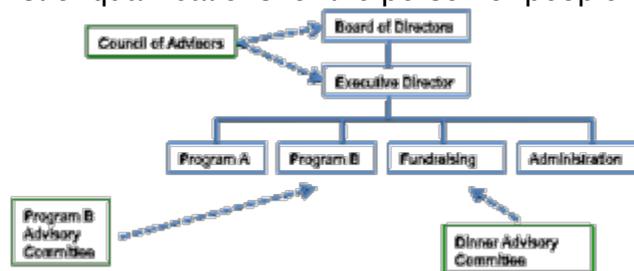
Advisory Task Force or a Latino Community Advisory Council.

- **Letterhead:** Organization Y wants to use the names of prestigious friends on its letterhead but doesn't expect or demand any other involvement. The "Advisory Council" exists only as a heading under which these names can be listed; it's helpful to Y and it's easy for individuals to lend their names as supporters to a nonprofit they admire and like.
- **Fiscally sponsored:** Organization Z is an artists co-op that doesn't have its own 501(c)(3) status, but works under the fiscal sponsorship of another organization. As a result of not having incorporated separately, Z cannot legally have a board of directors. Its advisory committee acts in many of the same roles that a board of directors does but doesn't have the same legal responsibilities. If Z decides to incorporate separately, the advisory committee members will form its board of directors.

Guidelines for having advisory boards

1. Develop a written description of the responsibilities, activities, and limits on authority of the advisory board, and share this description with prospective members.

2. Distinguish between the **role of the governing board of directors and the advisory board**. For example, a board of directors hires the executive director of the organization; an advisory board may draw up a suggested list of qualifications for the person or people hiring the executive director. A board of directors can direct staff to take certain actions; an advisory board can suggest actions to staff and can be angry if its suggestions aren't taken, but an advisory board can't compel staff to act. An easy way to communicate this distinction is not to use the term "board" for the advisory group; instead use "committee" or "council."



3. Consider asking a **community leader to chair** the advisory committee and act as a spokesperson for the organization in the community. Alternatively, have a board member lead the advisory committee.

4. If the main purpose of the advisory board is **fundraising**, consider a different name such as "Friends of X" or "Community Leadership Council." If you don't have volunteer leaders who will take responsibility for organizing and driving this group, delay creating it until you have found such leaders.

5. Don't establish an advisory board **if you cannot commit the time** and thought to getting results from the group, and to making the experience meaningful and rewarding for members. Too many organizations have erred by creating advisory boards where members felt ignored, or as if they were being asked for donations in the disguise of being asked to advise.

6. **Don't be afraid to disband** an advisory board that isn't achieving what it was established to accomplish. Consider instead asking members to be "Advisors" or a "Council of Advisors," both terms that give a mutual sense of affiliation without implying group meetings.

Sample invitation to join an advisory committee

Dear _____,

We would like to invite you to join the Advisory Council of WXYZ. This council consists of thoughtful community leaders who meet three times per year to advise the WXYZ board of directors and staff. We admire the work you have done with children in the SW neighborhood of our city, and we would be very grateful to have your thinking as we go forward.

The responsibilities of Advisory Council members are to:

- Attend three meetings per year, each held on a weekday from 8:00 am to 9:45 am
- Contribute your expertise and thinking to the current and future work of WXYZ
- Be available for four to five telephone calls each year from staff seeking advice
- Allow WXYZ to publish your name as a member of the Advisory Council

In return, WXYZ promises you:

- A delicious breakfast three times a year and meetings that start and end on time
- A complimentary membership during your term on the Advisory Council
- An appreciation of your time and a commitment not to abuse your time or your generosity
- Advisory Council terms are for two years.

Enclosed is a roster of current Advisory Council members, and a schedule of meetings for the coming year.

One of us will be calling you within the next few days to answer your questions and to give you a personal invitation to join the council. Thank you, and we look forward to talking with you.

Signed, Chair of the Board of Directors and the Executive Director

Jan Masaoka is Editor of Blue Avocado and author of Best of the Board Cafe, Second Edition [4], from which this article is adapted. She is an advisory board member of BoardSource, Stanford Social Innovation Review, and Asian Americans for Community Involvement.

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