

# Introduction

“When it comes to governance, everyone is an expert.”

— John C. Whitehead

*Ron was enjoying a cup of coffee with an old friend, Denise, and telling her how delighted he had been with the invitation to become a member of the executive committee of a board he had joined a few years earlier. Denise, who was an experienced chief executive with a nonprofit organization, shared Ron’s enthusiasm. After all, he had been volunteering for the organization for five years, had served as a board member for the last three, and was very dedicated to its cause. “Ron, that’s wonderful!” exclaimed Denise, “The executive committee can be very, very helpful, but it also can become too elite. Our board is so small that we decided not to have one.”*

*“But, Denise, I don’t have a clue what that committee does. How will I know the best way to get involved?” said Ron. Denise’s answer didn’t make things any clearer, “It depends, Ron, on what your organization is looking for. All executive committees are different.”*

When looking at its structure, one of the first things a nonprofit board should ask itself is whether or not it really needs an executive committee. While many boards find executive committees to be very helpful, most boards do not use one or need one, and still operate an effectively run board. This book presents guidelines for each board to make its own and its best decision on whether or not to implement this type of work group for the board. The text takes a look at how a justifiable executive committee operates and presents some best practices for run-

ning the committee, addressing common pros and cons for whether an executive committee is the right choice for your board. Some of the benefits and challenges inherent in operating an executive committee will be discussed, and recommendations for structuring the work of the board's leadership will be offered.

Current executive committee members may find some helpful ideas for operating their committee more effectively or for reforming some existing operations. The material presented here also may serve as a tool to new board members doing homework on how boards and committees function. It will be useful to chief executives, as well, who are looking for ways to use an executive committee as both a sounding board and a professional support.

Some boards may find the executive committee to be effective because, with fewer people, it can be more productive than the full board. At the same time, the executive committee can become a divisive force on the board. A board may begin by asking itself, "If so many other nonprofits have executive committees, shouldn't ours as well?" The answer to this question depends upon many things, such as the size and structure of the board, the geographic distribution of its members, the skill level of the board's leadership, and the purpose for having the committee at all.

Executive committees invite strong reactions. As Robert Andringa and Ted Engstrom observe in the *Nonprofit Board Answer Book*, "There is no other committee with more potential to help — or to hinder — good governance."<sup>1</sup>

The only legitimate reason to create and use an executive committee is to help the full board do its job — to make sure that the organization does what it is supposed to do, accomplishing its mission. The board itself is responsible for determining if an executive committee is needed and what its role should be.

The board and its officers, committees, and members are a means to this end, not an end unto themselves. The degree to which the promise of a mission is kept is the best measure of performance.

1. Andringa, Robert. C., and Ted W. Engstrom. *Nonprofit Board Answer Book: Practical Guidelines for Board Members and Chief Executives* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: BoardSource, 2001.