



TERM LIMITS: THUMBS UP? THUMBS DOWN?

Nonprofit boards have been debating the pros and cons of term limits for many years. If your board has not embraced term limits (and we recommend you do), perhaps the time is now for your board to revisit the topic. This infographic is designed to help you tee-up the conversation.



THE PROs OF TERM LIMITS

- Provide opportunity for the board and organization to work with talented community members who can devote only a few years to board service
- Make it easier to diversity your board, which brings new ideas and new perspectives to the board and its decision-making process
- Enable you to avoid stagnation, tiredness, boredom, and loss of commitment that can sometimes set in when board members serve long terms
- Enable you to avoid the perpetual concentration of power within a small group of people and the intimidation of new members by this dominant group
- When staggered, provide a built-in balance of continuity and turnover
- Allow for rotation of committee assignments
- Raise awareness of and provide opportunities to change and improve group dynamics
- Provide a respectful and efficient mechanism for the exit of passive, ineffective, or troublesome board members
- Enlarge your circle of committed supporters as members rotate off the board
- Enable the board to easily adjust its membership to reflect the organization's changing needs



THE CONs OF TERM LIMITS

- Potential loss of expertise or insight that has benefitted the board and organization over time
- Potential loss of organizational memory
- Need for the governance committee to dedicate more time to the identification, recruitment, and orientation of new board members
- Need to dedicate additional time to building the cohesiveness of the board as members rotate on and off the board

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TERM LIMITS FAQs

Where are term limits defined?

Term limits for board members should be defined in the bylaws of the organization.

What are the most common term set-ups?

According to [Leading with Intent: A National Index of Nonprofit Board Practices 2015](#), 71 percent of nonprofit boards have term limits. The most common board member term structure is two consecutive three-year terms. A staggered term system allows a certain number of new members to be chosen each year, preventing no more than one half (preferably one third) of the terms from expiring at the same time. Without any term limits, some board members may serve 20 to 30 years on one board.

Should board chairs and other officers have term limits?

Board chairs play a critical role in board leadership and development, devoting considerable time to the organization and exerting considerable influence over the board. Term limits help prevent board chairs from burning out by shortening the duration of their commitment. Term limits also enable the board to adjust its leadership to suit changing organizational needs and help protect the board and chief executive from an ineffective chair. Board chairs are more likely than other officers to have term limits. According to *Leading with Intent*, the most common chair structure is two consecutive one-year terms.

By comparison, other officer positions offer a measure of continuity and depth of institutional knowledge because of the likelihood of longer tenure. Other officers, especially the treasurer, often bring specialized knowledge that may be difficult to replace on a regular basis. That said, recruiting board members with leadership capabilities and grooming them for officer positions remains important for board revitalization. According to *Leading with Intent*, the most common term structure for vice chairs, secretaries, and treasurers is an unlimited number of one-year terms.

When a board member leaves....

- make sure your governance committee is prepared in advance with a fresh list of new candidates
- make a habit of conducting exit interviews. These are excellent occasions for the governance committee to get feedback from retiring board members.
- create guidelines for emeritus status for truly outstanding board members
- be inventive in finding other ways to keep productive members attached to the organization (task force and/or advisory council assignments, fundraising activities, volunteer activities)
- consider allowing outstanding members to rejoin the board after taking a sabbatical year after their last term