

ADVISORY COUNCILS

NINE KEYS TO SUCCESS



Many nonprofits employ advisory councils — a collection of individuals who advise and support the governance work of the board or the management tasks carried out by staff.

- They can provide you with specialized expertise that may be lacking in your nonprofit.
- Their members can be ambassadors to your community and connect you to a greater constituency.
- They can perform important duties, such as fundraising, advocacy, and program evaluation.
- Their members can be candidates to fill future board seats.

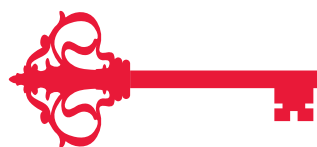


Well-conceived and well-executed advisory councils can be very beneficial. Unfortunately, many are not well conceived nor well executed.

Here are nine keys to a successful advisory council:

1. Be prepared to give it time and resources.

Advisory councils require care and feeding, just like governing boards do, to be effective. If you and/or the staff are short on time and resources, think twice before forming one. It could end up being a poor use of your council members' time and expertise and frustrate you. Explore other options for accomplishing what it is you want or need from an advisory council, such as working with individuals to get the job done. It's often easier and less time-consuming to manage individuals than manage a group of individuals.



2. Make sure you know exactly what it is you want the council to accomplish.

A lack of clarity in purpose, role, or scope is a common problem with advisory councils. It's important to have a written statement of purpose that addresses the following topics:

- Reason for the advisory council to exist; its goals.
- Relationship of the advisory council to the governing board.
- Relationship of the staff to the advisory council.
- Criteria for membership.
- Description of the selection process and to whom the advisory council reports.
- Length of term of service and duration of the group.
- Job description that identifies the specific responsibilities or expectations of individual members.
- Titles and duties of officers.
- Number and frequency of meetings.



3. Find the *right* advisory council members; take your matchmaking seriously.

The council's purpose and goals should determine its size, its meeting frequency, and its credentials for membership. Form must follow function, not the other way around. Seek out the skill sets, expertise, and insights that are required to meet the council's goals. The quality and commitment of those selected to serve on the advisory council will impact its effectiveness. Explain to prospective members why they were chosen and what will be expected of them.



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4. Prepare your council members for service through an orientation program.

Set the stage for success by teaching your council members about your organization's mission, vision, values, and strategic plan. Explain, again, the role of the council and your expectations.

5. Support your council with well-developed meeting agendas, adequate supporting material sent in advance of the meeting, and skilled meeting facilitation.

In this aspect, effective advisory councils follow the example of well-planned governing board meetings.

6. Create mechanisms for communication and opportunities for dialogue between the governing board and the advisory council.

To facilitate ongoing communication and to provide the board with the council's expertise and advice, consider the following:

- Invite the chair of the advisory council to serve as a nonvoting member of the board or on a board committee related to the council's purpose.
- Invite the chair of the advisory council to make regular reports at governing board meetings or include a report in the consent agenda with other committee reports.

7. Periodically assess the council's performance to identify its strengths and weaknesses or determine if it has outlived its initial purpose.

This can be done through self-assessment, internal review by an internal ad-hoc committee, or third-party reviews by an external consultant. The organization and council should define the criteria by which the council's work can be judged. Possible questions to ask council members include the following: What would this organization be missing if this council was not in existence? In what ways could we add greater value?

8. Keep your group fresh and informed through continuing education.

Invite governing board members to make presentations at advisory council meetings. Enable council members to observe the way the organization works by experiencing its programs and services firsthand. Maintain a reasonable flow of information between meetings that keeps the council members informed of key organizational activities. Plan a retreat or special council meeting to give the advisors the opportunity to review their responsibilities, identify priorities to strengthen their performance, and get to know each other. Invite council members to organizational social events.

9. Disband the advisory council when...

...there is a lack of funds or staff time to support the group, when the council is not meeting its goals, or simply because the group has achieved its goals and its work is done. In all cases, the organization should show its gratitude to the group for the time and effort each member contributed.