



What Should Be the Role of the Executive Committee?

By Amy Asin

An executive committee can play a crucial role in the strategic leadership of a congregation. Regrettably, many congregational executive committees – rather than fulfilling their true purpose – serve only to preprocess board decisions, leading to a disengaged board. We have seen a trend among congregations that realize this diminished role is ineffective but lacking an understanding of the true value of the executive committee, are choosing to eliminate it.

This trend is problematic because a well-functioning executive committee provides tremendous value to a congregation. Certain functions of the executive committee can create a better running board, as well as help establish the congregation's leadership culture and ensure a strong future for the congregation. Rather than eliminating the executive committee, consider the important role it should play.

What exactly is that role?

Here is a guide to what an executive committee should do – always, never, and sometimes.

An executive committee should *always* perform these functions:

1. **Act as a sounding board for the congregation's senior leadership.**

In most congregations, the members of the executive committee should serve as trusted advisors for the president, the senior or solo rabbi, and other senior staff. In congregations without staff, they should serve as thought partners for the lay leaders who oversee various functions of the congregation.

Senior leaders who have an idea in the early stages of inception should be able to turn to the executive committee for initial, confidential feedback to assist in thinking through the idea before sharing it with the full board or with a specific working group. Such a conversation is not intended as a way to get the idea approved.

For example, an executive director and treasurer may want to rethink the way their congregation approaches budgeting every year. Before bringing this idea to the board, they check in with the executive committee to get a sense of whether a change in the budgeting process is a priority, understand what concerns their new plan should address, and get advice about who else they should consult in the process. Following this initial discussion, the executive director and treasurer would work on their plan and eventually present it to the full board for approval.

2. Ensure the board is equipped to work well across all three modes of governance.

To meet a congregation's sacred purpose, [boards need to be involved in three modes of governance](#): generative thinking, strategic action, and fiduciary oversight. The executive committee should set the stage for the board to engage successfully in all three modes.

How?

The executive committee should ensure the board has annual priorities for its work and that each priority is appropriately staffed with volunteers, clergy, and/or staff. It should also ensure that board members have clear portfolios; connections to committees, task forces, or working groups; and special projects on which to work.

The executive committee should establish a thoughtful agenda for each board meeting, suggesting generative and strategic questions for the board to consider, and keeping management conversations to a minimum. It also should work in advance with individuals making presentations to the board to ensure they have done their homework, will present in an appropriate manner, and have considered answers (or a timeline) to questions board members are likely to ask. These efforts are not to preapprove recommendations, but rather to ensure, to the extent possible, that recommendations are ready to be considered by the board, helping to make meetings effective. Finally, the

executive committee should keep the board accountable when it comes to following up on major work items, such as next steps on particular items as may be determined at a board retreat.

3. Ensure confidential handling of personnel matters.

In some congregations, the executive committee acts as the personnel committee; in others it ensures there is a functioning personnel committee. One of the biggest mistakes among congregations that eliminate their executive committees is that they fail to create a personnel committee in its place. Do not put yourself in a position where all personnel decisions have to be brought to the full board.

4. Handle emergency items between board meetings.

Since the executive committee tends to meet more frequently than the board, it can address urgent issues. However, the ability to convene a board via video or phone conferencing makes this function less important than in the past.

If the executive committee is performing more than the functions above, it should consider if it is overstepping its bounds. In particular, an executive committee should never perform these functions:

1. Take an official vote for the congregation, except under extreme circumstances.
2. Decide not to bring an issue or item to the board for a vote because the executive committee itself disagrees about whether or not to approve it.
3. Delegitimize the board by reprocessing decisions and bringing them to the board only for approval.

Finally, in our smallest congregations – those with fewer than 150 households or those with little or no staff – the executive committee sometimes coordinates the operations of the congregation. This role is an important one in these congregations, but even then, it shouldn't be its only role. In small congregations with staff or clergy, operations, to the extent possible, should not be within the realm of the executive committee.

Many thought leaders endorse the important role of an executive committee. [According to nonprofit consultant Joan Garry](#), an executive

committee is not only vital, but also has the potential to bring enormous value to nonprofit organizations.

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