

5 Types of Church Boards

I have the privilege of working with multiple churches across denominational and geographical lines. What I find is that while every church is unique, one of the more common elements that small and medium-size churches struggle with has to do with board structure. Defining the roles and responsibilities of the church board and how they relate to the staff and lay leaders. This is a common point of tension and frustration. In this post, I want to identify five common types of church boards and how they function in the local church.

1) Rubber Stamp Boards (Impotent)

Rubber stamp boards exist for the sole purpose of approving and working at the pleasure of the senior pastor or another dominant personality in the church. These board members have titles but they are basically impotent. They meet, listen, but they are scared to take initiative or pushback. The Board is made of people who have a title but they have no power or no influence. They only approve and right off on the plans and directives of the dominant person or family in the church.

2) Advisory Boards (Passive)

Advisory boards exist for the sole purpose of giving input without wanting responsibility. If there is one word I can use to describe these types of boards it would be passive. They often exist in churches that have a strong and trusted leader. The board has enough confidence in this leader that they follow only giving input when asked but basically deferring leadership responsibility. The Board is merely a sounding board for the leader to share ideas and to give input to those ideas. This is a safe board structure for a strong leader but overall it is not a healthy model and falls short of the biblical responsibility for elders.

3) Management Boards (Controlling)

Management boards exist with the assumption that it is their job to control and to oversee all elements of church life. As a result the pastor, staff, and lay leaders are often required, or they feel the need to ask permission before acting. Board members often believe it is their job to approve a majority of the decisions in the church. In some cases, they falsely believe that individual elders have the power to put the brakes on anything. This is perhaps the most predominant board model in small and medium-size churches, and it is more influenced by the American model of democracy than it is Scripture. Management boards are right to believe that elders have a strong responsibility to be overseers of the congregation, but the methodology and process in which they carry that out it is flawed. As a result it often leaves staff members feeling micro-managed and untrusted. Furthermore this model of church governance will never allow the church to grow to its redemptive potential because it is not empowering. The churches numeric growth will be capped out whatever number of people the elders giving a few hours a week can manage.

4) Review Boards (Critical)

Review boards usually result as an evolution of board members realizing that they are not to be managers and they want to empower staff to do the work they are called too. But once they in turn loose the reigns to staff and ministry leaders they notice that mistakes occur. Then complaints and problems start coming to the Board over decisions they had no control over. Therefore, when the Board gathers to meet a disproportionate amount of time is spent rehashing of the previous few weeks or months. They then question and second guess what occurred or how things were handled. This board model gives freedom to staff and ministry leaders, but then is forced to continually play Monday morning quarterback and revisit what has already taken place. Staff feel untrusted and second-guessed. Board members feel frustrated

because they're trying to trust yet they feel out of control and must continually deal with the fallout of problems within the church. Review Boards tend to see a lot of turnover because Board members feel like they don't do anything except put out fires they had nothing to do with.

5) Visionary or Policy Governance Boards (Empowering)

Policy governance boards are the most biblical but yet the least prevalent model in American churches. In this form of governance the board works with the staff to set direction and vision, and then pro actively develops policies, boundaries, and expectations to carry the ministry out. They also set big picture expectations and seek to hold staff and lay leaders accountable for those preset and clear expectations. This model of governance is what we see in Acts 15 when the church has having sharp debate over the issue of Gentiles in the church. The apostles gathered and had spirited discussion. Ultimately set a policy that they put in writing and then gave to each of the apostles as they were sent out to do ministry on the fringes. The apostles are expected to return to Jerusalem and to periodically give reports on how ministry is going, but they are not micro-managed. They are trusted! In this model of governance the rules and expectations for board members, as well as staff, are put into writing not just articulated verbally. And the board maintains a sense of control, and carries out their responsibilities as overseers by proactively setting expectations, as well as developing policies. Staff and lay leaders have freedom to carry out their ministries within those boundaries. When they fail to meet expectations or when they step outside of the agreed-upon boundaries they face discipline or consequence. This form of governance is the most healthy and the most biblical, but it often requires coaching and time to implement, because so few churches are actually living it out.