

AGB
Effective
Committee
Series

Restructuring Committees

by Theodore E. Long





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Table of Contents

About the <i>Effective Committee Series</i>	vi
Introduction: <i>Context and Foundation</i>	1
Section 1: <i>Why Restructure?</i>	3
Section 2: <i>What is Restructuring?</i>	8
Section 3: <i>Conditions for Successful Restructuring</i>	17
Section 4: <i>Implementing Change</i>	21
Section 5: <i>Pitfalls and Stumbling Blocks</i>	28
Section 6: <i>Sustaining Restructuring in a Changing World</i>	35
Conclusion: <i>The Fruits of Restructuring</i>	38
Appendix A: Restructuring at Chatham University	40
Appendix B: Restructuring at the College of New Jersey	42
Appendix C: Restructuring at the University of North Texas System	44
Appendix D: Restructuring at Xavier University	45
Appendix E: Restructured Committee Charters at Capital University	47
Notes	55
About the Author	56

About the Effective Committee Series

The *Effective Committee Series* is devoted to strengthening the role of key standing committees of governing boards. While there is no optimum committee system for institutions of higher education, certain principles, practices, and procedures prevail. The best practices outlined below support the objectives of board committees: focused effort, informed decision making, and self-management.

FOCUS THE WORK OF COMMITTEES

The work of boards should be grounded in the work of its committees. Working in tandem, committees enhance the purpose and advance the productivity of the full board.

- Committee charges or charters should clearly declare the governance purpose of each committee.
- Committee work should be aligned with the institution's strategic vision, goals, and priorities.
- Committees should translate their charges into annual goals and work plans that align with the board's governance responsibilities and the institution's strategic plan.
- Committees should focus on monitoring the institution's strategic progress and the committee's accomplishments.
- Committee meeting agendas should be concise, developed in consultation with the committee chair and designated staff member, clearly state desired meeting outcomes, and should be distributed—with appropriate supporting documents—well in advance.
- Committee members should strike an appropriate balance between “too much” and “too little” information. They must guard against requesting overly detailed information to avoid becoming embroiled in administration or overburdening staff. At the same time, they need sufficient supporting materials to make sound recommendations and ensure adequate oversight.

Context and Foundations

One of the principles of good practice recommended by AGB is that every college and university board “should periodically review its committee structure to determine whether current committee operations—structure and practices—continue to cover the board’s oversight responsibilities, serve strategic purposes, and support effective committee performance.” The rapid pace of change in higher education makes that principle especially important, for boards need to be just as nimble and adaptive as their institutions must be to meet the shifting challenges they face. The process of committee restructuring has thus become a central feature of effective board and committee practice and should be understood as an ongoing responsibility of every board.

Restructuring Committees provides board leaders with a manual for carrying out successful restructuring projects. It combines general principles with practical guidance. Recognizing that each board must act in light of its institution’s history, current situation, and capacities, this publication does not prescribe specific *outcomes* boards should seek to achieve through restructuring. Instead, it lays out a general *process* of restructuring that every board can use to address its own needs. Successful restructuring processes have much in common, but the outcomes of restructuring are quite varied.

mary asset it is charged with addressing. For example, Capital University's board (see appendix E) reorganized into four committees, each with its own area of focus: mission and identity, educational quality, organizational sustainability, and integrity and compliance. In Nevada, the state higher education system's board created a new committee on community colleges to address the specific needs of those units under its purview. Because this approach is focused on long-term institutional assets, the committee structure can be sustained over a long period of time, adjusting the annual focus of committee work as conditions require.

2. Strategic objectives. A number of boards want to focus their attention on major strategic objectives, so they organize their committees around them. For example, in reorganizing its committees around a new strategic vision, Wofford College's board created committees around objectives such as "preparing exemplary leaders and citizens, recruiting and retaining talented students, and strengthening the community." Committees organized in this way may change periodically as institutional strategy is revised and updated.

3. Types of board work. Another way to organize committees is to center them on specific types of work that the board must do. For example, the University of North Texas System created a new committee on "strategic and operational excellence" (see appendix C), while Chatham University created a new committee on "external relations" in its reorganized structure (see appendix A). And Warren Wilson College created a new committee on "innovation and risk." Such committees can reasonably remain in place for some time, but as the responsibilities and expectations of boards evolve, so will the types of work their committees are called upon to undertake.

4. Combinations. Many institutions combine the several types of focus noted above, including the functional. For example, most boards have a committee that addresses educational questions or the student experience—both of which are aligned with functional areas of the institution—even if they also have a committee on strategy or committees on planning objectives. And most boards have a committee that addresses institutional legal and compliance responsibilities alongside other, more innovative committees.

There is no single right way for boards to focus their committees, but there are two clear principles. First, committees should be few in number. Second, they should focus the board's attention on the most important areas for