



# **Avoiding “Governance Creep:”**

## **TIME TO RECONSIDER YOUR GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE?**

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*Working from a benchmarking survey of 10 associations of varying size, structure, and mission, we take a hard look at the realities of association governance facing a range of forces: blowback from the economic downturn; changing conditions in the labor market; globalization; new models for education, training, and certification; and shifts in work-life balance. The results: associations need to thoughtfully link governance change to strategy and leadership—in ways that these organizations often fail to do.*

The structures and processes of many associations have grown bloated and hardened; based on antiquated organizational designs, they struggle to keep up with the rhythms and demands of contemporary work and lifestyles. And like any bureaucracy, governance systems have a tendency to self-replicate. Associations are continually battling “governance creep”—growing complexity in governance structures and processes that distracts from delivering value for the membership. New governance entities (committees, sections) are more easily created than destroyed, and the result can be an ever-expanding organizational albatross that demands constant feeding.

While common, governance creep is problematic because it directs resources (time, staff and volunteer energy, funds) towards feeding the governance beast, and in the process diverts associations from delivering the best products and services to members. Too much complexity can discourage members, acting as a barrier rather than an invitation to broader volunteer participation and engagement. And it’s not just aversion to complexity that drives some members away. As a member of one association we worked with remarked with exasperation, “If you volunteer, you want to at least feel you are making a substantive contribution.” Overgrown governance structures and dense processes can separate members, volunteers and staff from feeling they are making a difference in the organization.

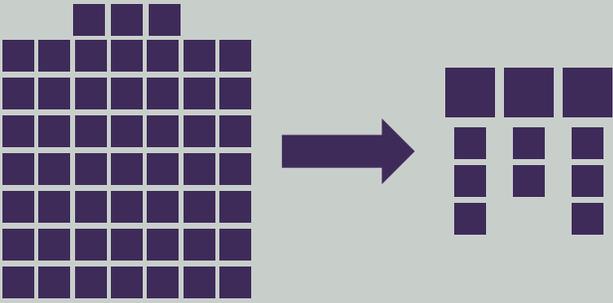
Associations can do several things to overcome governance creep. The very process of trying to find the balance between member participation and the ability to make timely strategic decisions often forces associations to think in fresh, creative ways about engagement. Simplifying governance structures and clarifying mandates can add speed and efficiency to organizations.

- ▶ **Trim the fat.** Many of the associations we assessed have moved towards simpler structures, paring down the number of components, committees, and sections and replacing standing entities with more ad hoc short-term bodies, tightly focused on explicit initiatives. These “cleaner,” more adaptive forms give rise to relevant, nimble, and strategic processes more responsive to shifts in professional environments—and better able to accommodate the demands of members’ busier work lives (naturally, some functions will always be better served by a standing group—i.e., advocacy and government affairs because of the ongoing, relationship-driven nature of their work). Ad hoc structures can be effective given the specificity of their focus and limited time commitments. In the case of our survey group, the small time commitment piece also attracted talented members who may have shied away from roles requiring a larger time investment. After realizing that their members wanted more short-term opportunities for participation, one association of medical professionals is starting to engage members through issue-specific ad hoc groups. “If people participate in the organization, they sustain their membership,” notes the executive director. “Other professional activities are not as critical to us as engagement more broadly.”

- ▶ **Clarify roles and rules.** Our interviewees realized the need to clarify roles and responsibilities to improve the effectiveness of leaders and component groups. One medical association identified a wider variety of possible roles—advisory, policy-making, outreach, and leadership development—for its component groups, and explicitly built them into its mandates. Another association representing clinical specialists now makes an additional investment of time to help senior staff and key volunteer leaders understand their individual roles in the governance system. In both cases, we observed how making difficult choices about role, authority, and responsibility actually allowed for greater agility in dealing with organizational uncertainty and shifting member demands—and improved collaboration among various component groups. Sometimes you have to slow down to speed up!
- ▶ **But build in some flex.** At the same time, we also believe that for associations to keep pace with inevitable change, they should recognize that roles for staff and volunteer leaders will need to remain somewhat fluid. As helpful as it may be to achieve role clarity, leaders need to be comfortable negotiating their involvement in association activities, sometimes on a case-by-case basis. One organization we spoke with attributed its ability to be more responsive to a flexible, delegable view of decision-making authority. Their governing process allows the executive committee to give various volunteer entities the power to make decisions and move quickly to implement them.

Associations benefit from recognizing governance creep and bringing to the surface two central questions: whom do governance structures serve? And what, ultimately, is the value of their complexity? The answers to these questions vary from organization to organization, but thoughtful consideration leads to increased engagement and more efficient strategic decision-making capabilities, containing and dampening the possibility of governance creep.

**The shift to ad hoc member groups**  
 One association representing over 100,000 medical professionals has cut down from 52 to just three standing committees overseeing various ad hoc groups.



Another re-organized into three advisory councils and one cabinet, with each of those groups commissioning their own ad hoc groups to meet specific organizational goals.

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