



*What's a Snippet?* Glad you asked! A Snippet is short article about meetings or parliamentary procedure. New snippets are released on the first day of every month at [www.agreatmeeting.com](http://www.agreatmeeting.com).



## Snippet #130 Board Size

What's the perfect board size? Beware if someone answers that question with a number, without asking about your organization and its culture. It's like asking someone what the perfect size family is, or the perfect size house. The answer to all three questions is that it depends entirely on the circumstances, needs and priorities.

These choices are best made by starting from within, not by looking to see what everyone else is doing. When we base our decisions on what someone else has done, or their results, we are often disappointed that we aren't as successful. The problem lies in the definition of success – we can't use someone else's definition, we have to find our own.

Beware the adjectives. Lately, the words "strategic" and "high-performing" and "nimble" have been in fashion, but others have come and gone, too. Every board of every size has the capacity to be more strategic and high-performing. And, nimbleness is a questionable commodity—you could go down the wrong path faster.

How does an organization take an inventory to determine their best board size? Start with these questions:

- How large is the association? Is it national, statewide, or local?
- How prominent is the public profile? What are the risks and rewards of quick action?
- Are there checks and balances? (Is there an annual membership meeting or delegate assembly?)
- How much control does the board have over the mission and messaging?
- What rights have traditionally been reserved to the members?
- What is the level of attendance for board meetings?

Then, test the waters by asking these questions for your association, with all of the above answers in mind:

- What's the smallest size board that can handle its responsibilities?
- What's the smallest size board that ensures enough diversity of thought?
- What is the largest size board that will ensure that everyone's voice can be heard?

Once you know what is too small and what is too big, you'll be able to pinpoint what's just right. For example, there are those who have stated that the best size board is five members. It certainly might be, in circumstances where the board has all of the control, doesn't need to hear a variety of opinions, and functions well when each director is 20% of the overall decision. And, keep in mind that a quorum of a board is usually a majority, so a five member board can be controlled by three people.

There are many boards that include a representative from every state – so the board is fifty or more people. In these cases the board functions more like a delegate assembly than a board, but the discussion is rich and fully representative of the culture of the association. This only indicates that there is a need for an executive committee to exercise the power of the board between meetings – but the executive committee remains accountable to the board and cannot alter board policy. (*See Snippet #123*).

What's the best range? In order to hear enough voices during meetings consider 9-11 as a minimum size. To have effective deliberation during the meeting, consider 19-21 as a maximum size, or provide for a smaller executive committee to take some of the responsibility for a larger board. Don't look for the "right size," look for "best fit."