Executive Team Composition

Determining who is on the executive team is critical. Including all the right perspectives can sometimes be at odds with keeping the team a manageable size. CEOs who rate their teams as highly effective balance two critical questions:

Does the team have the key perspectives and competencies to do its work?

- Representation from critical vantage points
- Relevant demographic diversity
- Agency-wide knowledge and thinking

Is the team a manageable size?

- 4-6 is optimal for:
  - Shared ownership
  - Interpersonal communication
  - Debate/discussion
- If 8+, consider smaller executive team and larger management team focused on different work

Finding this balance may not result in a group composed of the CEO's direct reports, e.g.

- You may want fewer members if the CEO has a large number of direct reports.
- You may want to augment the team with other members if certain critical perspectives are missing.

Use the questions on the next page to reflect on your executive team composition.

Key Questions for Reflection About Executive Team Composition

Answer the following questions to determine if you have the right people on your executive team.

1. Optimizing Team Composition

A. Is our team a manageable size with the right perspectives?	YES	NO

• Is the executive team a manageable size?
  – 4-6 enables better discussion, ownership, and decision making
• Do we have the perspectives to do our work?
  – E.g., organization-wide roles, demographic diversity, etc. (to surface more perspectives)		

B. Does our team have the competencies required to do the work?	YES	NO
• If not, can we develop them, or do we need to add to the team?		
C. Does our team get outside input when needed?	YES	NO
• If not, how can we get input from subject matter experts or other key stakeholders not in the room?		

2. Considering Two Top Teams

A. Is our executive team too large to be effective (8+ people)?	YES	NO
• If yes, see next question		
B. Should we consider two management teams?	YES	NO
• A smaller executive team, focused on strategic decisions and resource allocation • A larger management team, focused on cross-organizational operations coordination, sharing staff input, and communicating across the organization		
C. If we have two teams, have we clearly defined the areas of work for each team?	YES	NO

3. Evolving Team Composition

A. Do I need to make changes in the composition of the executive team to better align the team to the work we need to do?	YES	NO
• If so, can I take advantage of known turnover (e.g., CEO transition or natural attrition) or major strategic pivots (e.g., new strategic plan)?		

Executive Team Composition:
Peer Perspectives

Most nonprofit executive teams we've worked with have between four and six members. However, some CEOs prefer larger teams as a means to ensure the right perspectives are brought to bear for critical decisions. Other CEOs opt to balance the trade-offs inherent with larger teams and decision-making complexity and the desire for more perspectives by creating both a smaller executive team and a larger management team.

The nonprofit leaders interviewed here share how they approached forming their executive teams and, in some cases, broader leadership teams, around the critical work they needed to do.

How do you ensure that team composition reflects your work?

"Team composition is really driven by what we want to accomplish," said CEO Dorri McWhorter of YWCA Metropolitan Chicago. "Our [executive] team is larger than others because we have four programmatic team members who are critical for driving our different business lines, and we have included all of them at the table rather than having one programmatic role."

How do you approach strengthening or making changes to your executive team?

"It's important to have the ability to step back and really look at the team composition to see if you have 95 percent of the capabilities you need covered," McWhorter said. "[YWCA Metropolitan Chicago] did this, and we definitely identified some gaps on our team. I'm willing to live with gaps as long as they are not permanent—if there are opportunities for team members to learn and grow to fill the gaps. In the meantime, we can backfill these needs with consultants and continue to assess where we are in the skill-building process."

Kirstin Chernawsky, executive director of Erie Neighborhood House, also offered advice about making changes to the team: "Most people, myself included, wait too long to makes changes in the team composition, because we don't want to hurt people's feelings. Then, after the change happens, you wish you had done this months before. More generally, you need a clear understanding of the roles, responsibilities, priorities, and norms of the executive and leadership teams. If you have those clear metrics, it's easier to look at your composition holistically and see what might not fit anymore, what might be askew, or where there may be a gap. If you don't have those things spelled out, it can be harder to see."

Some organizations have an executive team and a leadership team. How do you describe the role of each?

"The executive team is a safe space to bounce ideas off of one another and develop recommendations that we bring to the broader leadership team,"[1] said Chernawsky of Erie Neighborhood House. "We have also used it as a supportive space for problem-solving and addressing challenges that we are having or for discussing confidential topics that are not ready to be shared with the rest of management yet.

"We all work together during the broader leadership team meetings. It's important that the leadership team is its own entity—not just having the executive team attend a directors' meeting. I think this has enabled directors to function more like senior directors, and it has enabled senior directors to have a greater appreciation for the directors' perspectives and proximity to front-line staff and participants. So it has helped not only to provide professional development opportunities but also to keep front-line staff and participants at the forefront of our minds."

The Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta also has two teams: a small executive team comprising C-level team members, and a broader leadership team at the vice president-level and above.[2] "The different perspectives that nonexecutive team members bring to [the broader leadership team] are really helpful," CEO Eric Robbins said. "They bring creativity, technical and for-profit sector experience, and significant tenure in the field. There's something to be said about the variety of perspectives that makes this group's meetings fruitful.

"I bring more sensitive topics to the executive team and topics that just would not be as productive to discuss in a larger group, like staff salaries, promotions, and our organizational chart, to think them through on a broader level," Robbins explained. "I like having the larger team, with tentacles into all parts of the organization but having the luxury of a smaller team when I need it."

1   Erie Neighborhood House's broader leadership team consists of the executive team (the executive director, senior director of Development and Communications, senior director of Operations, senior director of Programs & Quality Assurance, and senior director of Finance) in addition to the director of Human Resources; director of Community Resources & Education Programs; director of Child Care; director of Expanded Learning Programs for Children & Youth; director of Citizenship, Immigration, & Health; director of Facilities, and director of IT.

2   The Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta's executive team consists of the CEO, chief financial and administrative officer, chief impact officer, and chief philanthropy officer; their broader leadership team includes these individuals in addition to the vice president of Community Planning and Impact, the vice president of Donor Services, the vice president of Innovation, the vice president of Major Gifts, and the vice president of Marketing.