

# Master Policy; Don't Let It Master You.

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“Wait just a minute,” chimes Martin, “our policy says we have to...” If people start rolling their eyes around the board table when something like this is said, it may be that your board has allowed policy to get out of perspective. Many boards are benefiting by using policy as a tool in leading their organizations. However, we have observed that some have encountered a pitfall. Some boards are allowing policy to become their master, spending a lot of time and energy to comply with outdated or over-detailed policies. This contradicts the purpose of policy and undermines the true leadership responsibility of the board.

## What You Can Do

Always remember that policy is created to serve the board and the organization, not the other way around. Here's a list of some guidelines to help you and your board:

1. Keep the big picture in mind when writing policy — boards are to be the ‘guardian of the vision’ not the dictators of detail.
2. Be careful to confine board policy to governance issues, not operational ones.
3. Make policies concise and only record what you believe must be a written policy. The longer your set of policies becomes, the less likely it will be that directors and managers actually know them.
4. When assessing whether a policy has been followed, reflect on the “spirit” intended in the policy and make decisions appropriately.
5. Change policies as needed to enable the organization to follow the intent of the policy when exceptions arise or the policy is motivating actions that are not quite right.
6. Review your governing policies annually, ensuring they remain relevant for the organization and top-of-mind for the directors.

Remember—first and foremost, policy is a communication tool to help boards articulate their intentions, directions, and expectations. By following these guidelines and keeping policy in proper perspective, you will become masters of the policies of your organization. Otherwise they may master you.