

Continuum of participation in a nonprofit's governance



There are eight critical governance functions in nonprofit organizations, with a set of corresponding responsibilities. Some responsibilities must be fulfilled by the board because of legal and regulatory requirements, but many can be shared with and delegated to others. With the increasing complexity of governance and the urgency to deepen equity, it's become more important than ever to approach governance as shared leadership.

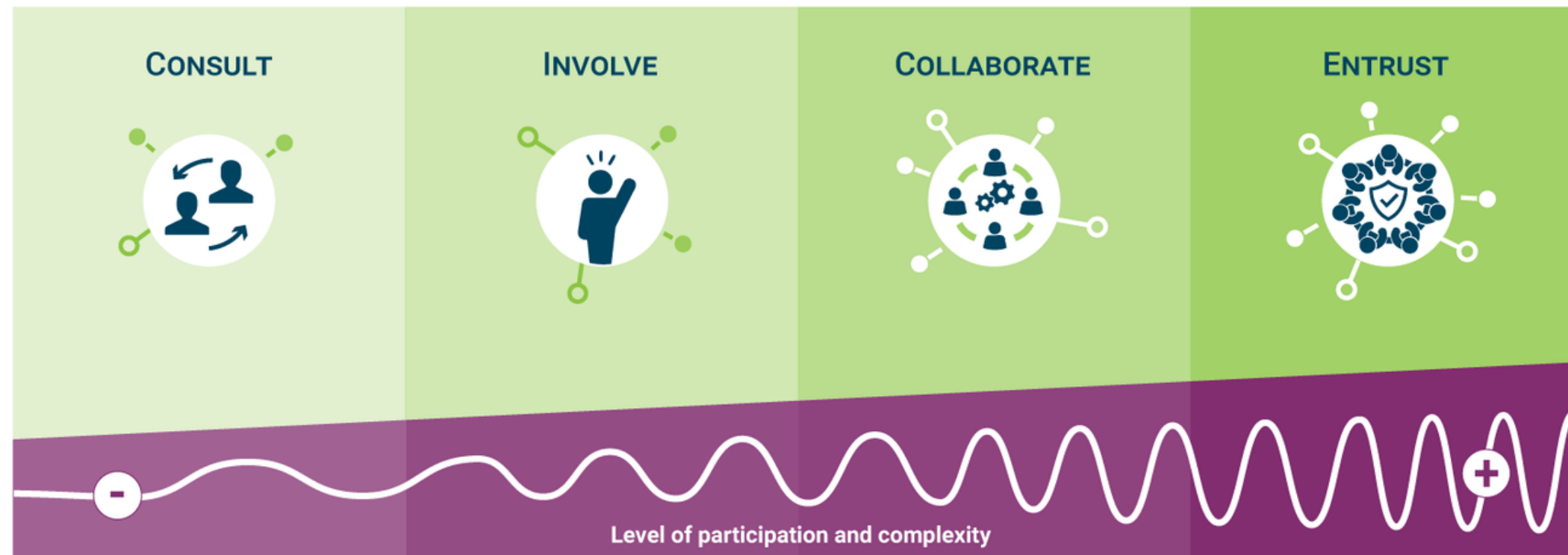
This continuum can help your organization to identify how stakeholders can participate in governance responsibilities or decisions.

Stakeholders can include staff leadership, volunteers from the community wanting to engage in governance work, those who are served or impacted by the organization, and collaborator and partner organizations. It can be used to explore a governance responsibility (e.g., setting strategic priorities) or a specific governance decision (e.g., whether or not to make a significant program shift).

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The continuum focuses on active participation in governance. While keeping stakeholders informed is important, it's not participation in governance because it's one-way communication; there is no interaction or dialogue. There are also instances when the board doesn't engage with others in governance responsibilities because they are fulfilling their legal and regulatory requirements (e.g., *duty of care and loyalty*), which can't be delegated or shared.

Participation in governance can range from less direct involvement (e.g., *providing input but not making decisions*) to greater participation (e.g., *helping co-create solutions, making strategic choices*). The greater the participation, the more complex the engagement. For example, more consensus may be required, and decision-making processes can be more complicated. There are also corresponding benefits of deeper participation, such as richer decisions and more diversified ownership of outcomes.



This tool is part of the Reimagining Governance Lab, a virtual hub for governance innovation full of resources, tools, and stories. [Visit the Lab.](#)

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CONTINUUM OF PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNANCE

CONSULT



Gather information

Seek information from stakeholders that informs governance decisions and choices. For example, perspectives and feedback on program design and strategic priorities. The decisions and choices are then communicated back to the stakeholders.

Could be done through surveys, focus groups, and webinars.

INVOLVE



Invite input

Seek deeper input which can range from feedback to advice to formal recommendations.

The input is carefully considered and then there is communication back to the stakeholders describing how it influenced decisions and choices.

Could be done through workshops, board meetings held in stakeholder settings, "town-halls," or advisory groups.

COLLABORATE



Partner and co-create

Actively collaborate on governance work, such as the formulation of solutions, making decisions, and determining choices. For example, addressing emergent strategic issues and opportunities.

Collaborators jointly share authority and accountability with the board for outcomes.

Could be done through participatory decision-making forums and consensus-based decision-making processes.

ENTRUST



Assign specific governance responsibilities

Engage staff leadership, governance volunteers, and other stakeholders to provide leadership, do the work, and make decisions, such as developing strategic directions and creating a risk management program.

The process builds trust. There are clear accountabilities (e.g., articulate parameters, set conditions) so that those fulfilling the responsibilities feel ownership and can be held accountable, while also giving the board confidence it's fulfilling its legal and regulatory requirements.

Could be done through task groups and formal assignments of roles and responsibilities.

Level of participation and complexity

