

Getting Masjid Governance Right: Exploring the Organizational Structures of American Mosques

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Our Challenge

- The number of masjids is growing and masjid attendance is increasing (except for African American masjids).
- However there are numerous obstacles facing masjids as they strive to go to the next level.
- ISNA Masjid Development Committee, Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU), I and many others are working to develop a consensus on the Prophetic Masjid as a vision for masjid development.

The Prophetic Masjid...

1. Enhances taqwa, increases Islamic knowledge, improves character
2. Builds a community of brotherhood and sisterhood by being a welcoming, inclusive community
3. Is mission-oriented, purpose-driven
4. Is dynamic by offering numerous avenues for involvement and serving as a center for the Muslim community
5. Operates with shura, effective leadership and good governance
6. Practices generosity
7. Is involved in the local community, upholding justice and assisting the needy
8. Promotes understanding of Islam and invites others to Islam

Finding guidance for masjid governance

- Look to Qur'an and sunnah.
- Look to knowledge and wisdom about governance of non-profits—wherever we find it.

Islamic guidance

- Allah and Prophet Muhammad (saaws) did not leave much specific guidance for how we organize ourselves. This is a blessing because specific guidelines might have become outdated as society changed.
- Allah and His Prophet (saaws) did leave basic organizational principles

Islamic Principles of Governance

- Shura—collective decision making. How to do shura is left open.
- Clear leadership—“when there are three of you traveling, appoint one to be the leader” (Ahmad, Abu Dawud with a good chain)
- Excellence in all that we do—“Allah has enjoined excellence in everything” (Muslim). This includes “seeking knowledge even to China.”

Basis of Recommendations

- 2011 survey of American masjids.
- 2014 survey of ISNA/NAIT masjids
- Detailed study of three masjids
- Study of 20 masjid constitutions
- Review of literature on the best practices for non-profits

Recommendation 1

- Masjids should have a board of trustees and an executive committee, but the functions of each must be distinguished

Need for a Masjid Board of Trustees

- Best practices for non-profit governance and best practices for the Islamic requirement of shura point to the need of a Board of Trustees who develops and protects the mission of the masjid and keeps the executive body and Imam in check and on track.
- The Board is like the shura of the elders.
- Every masjid with a minimum jum'ah attendance of 50 Muslims should form a Board of Trustees.
- 40% of ISNA masjids do not have a Board of Trustees; most African American masjids do not have a Board of Trustees.

Functions of a Board

- Set the direction of the masjid by defining vision, mission and goals; the Board keeps its focus on the big picture; the Board engages in strategic planning
- Oversight of the management of the masjid by evaluating and monitoring performance to keep the masjid progressing towards its mission and goals, to hold accountable masjid leaders and to ensure the financial viability of the masjid.

Need for an Executive Body

- A masjid needs a group (the Board) that focuses on oversight and vision, and one group (the Executive Committee) that focuses on managing the day-to-day activities of a masjid.

Functions of the Executive Committee

- The Executive Committee must be given full responsibility and authority to manage the masjid based on the mission and goals set by the Board. The Board must not micro-manage or interfere with the Executive Committee.
- The Executive Committee should be led by a President who is the executive head of the masjid.

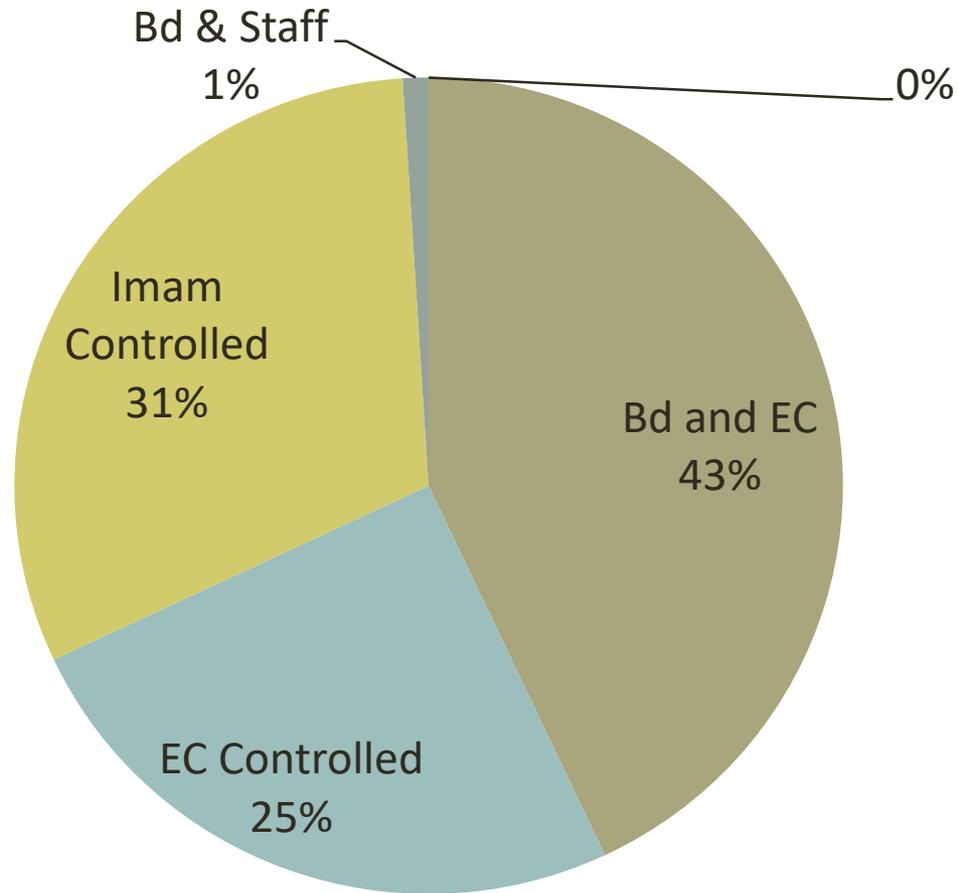
Size Matters

- The very small masjid needs only one body to be both Board and Executive Committee; and the mega-masjid with over 6 full-time employees does not need an Executive Committee because the staff manages day-to-day activities.
- Masjids that have over 50 Jum'ah attendance and only 1 full-time staff (typically the Imam) need an Executive Committee to handle the responsibility of managing the masjid. This is about 75% of all American masjids.

Present Situation of Masjid Governance

- Board, Executive Committee and Imam 43%
- Executive Committee and Imam (EC in charge) 25%
- Imam and Executive Committee (Imam in charge) 31%
- Board and salaried staff (mega-masjid) 1%

Governance Models



Evaluation of Governance Models

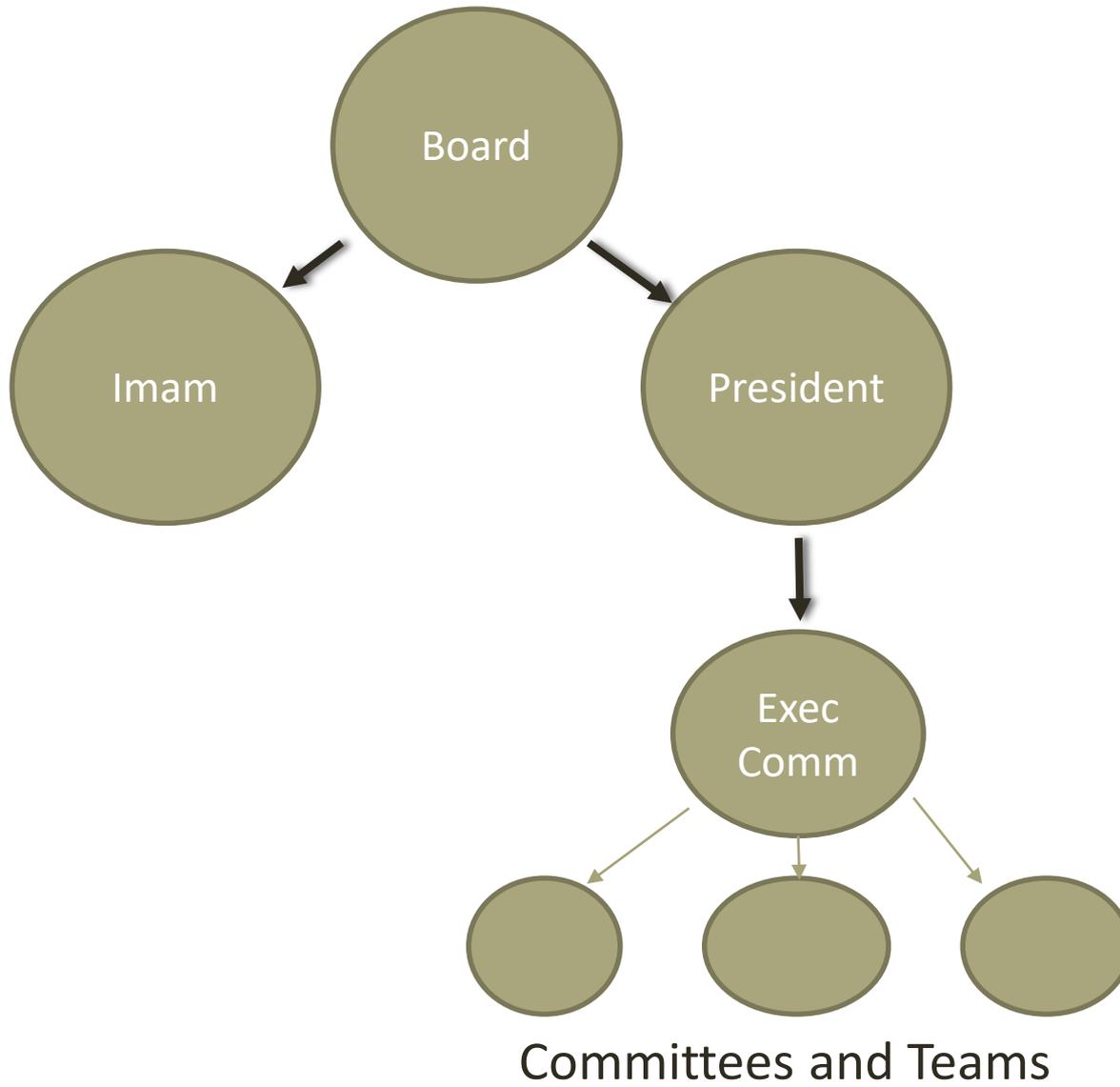
- The Executive Committee-controlled masjid is too busy to provide direction and strategic planning; and is unable to provide oversight. Imam is under-utilized
- The Imam-controlled masjid is unable to provide oversight for the Imam, and too busy to provide direction and strategic planning. Imam is over-utilized.

Problem with Bd/EC Masjids

- Most Boards in American Masjids do not serve the functions of oversight and direction-setting.
- Some Boards were formed to hold the deed and that is all they do.
- Some Boards are founder Boards, and as such they were formed to ensure that the masjid does not stray from the original vision of the founders.
- Some Boards simply do not understand their role, and often try to micro-manage and interfere in the work of the Imam and executive officers.

Recommendation 2

- Masjid leadership should be shared by the Imam who focuses on religious/pastoral matters and the President of the masjid who focuses on all other managerial matters



The Imam

- The Imam should have full responsibility over religious and educational affairs of the masjid.
- As the spiritual, moral and Islamic leader of the masjid, the Imam should be the outward leader.
- He is the one who enunciates the vision of the masjid through khutbahs and classes, leads prayers, provides Islamic opinions on issues, performs marriages and funerals, etc. To attendees the Imam is the face of the masjid and therefore he should be viewed as the leader.

The President

- The President is responsible for the day-to-day activities of the masjid—as such he is the executive head.
- The President works with the Executive Committee and other committees to fulfill this task.

Present Situation

- Only about 20% of masjids have this model of shared responsibilities between the Imam and the President, where the Imam is the leader.

Recommendation 3

- Elections are necessary for involving the community and empowering the elected officials; therefore the Board of Trustees, the President and other executive officers should all be elected

The Need for Elections

- Elections in masjids are like the quote, “democracy is the worse form of government except for all the others.”
- Elections are the best way to involve community members in decision making (shura)—to give them a sense that their voice counts, that they belong.
- Elections are the best way to course correct when leadership is not doing its job; and it is the best way to protect a masjid from being dominated by a clique.

Election of Masjid President

- The President should be elected because if he is to be viewed and respected as the executive head of the masjid, he needs the mandate of an election.
- When Presidents are not elected and are instead appointed by the Board, they are typically not viewed as the leader of the masjid.
- The term of the President and other executive officers should not be long.

Board Elections

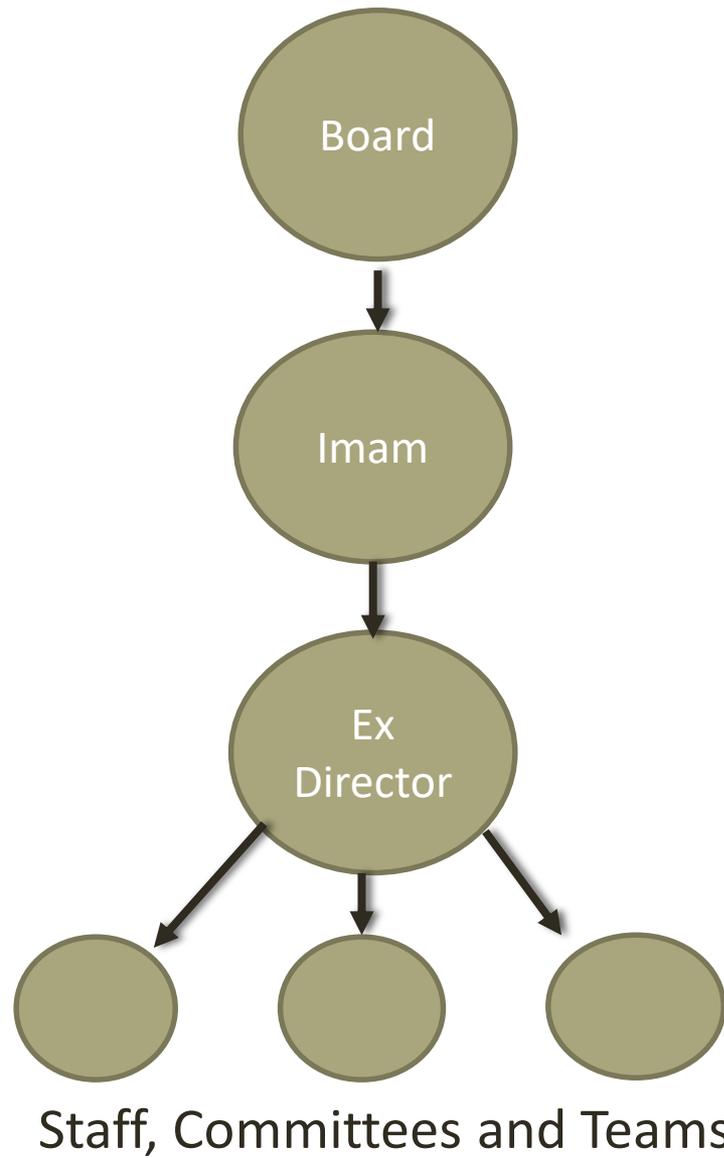
- It is a mistake for Boards not to be elected because inevitably they will become out of tune with the community; and the lack of elections indicates to attendees that change is impossible.
- The situation where Boards are dominated by founders with no elections eventually leads to conflict
- One compromise is to have certain Board members who are permanent and others who are elected.
- Board terms should be lengthy.

The Imam and elections

- The Imam should be hired or appointed by the Board. The Imam should not be elected.

Recommendation 4

- Ideally the Imam should be the leader of the masjid, responsible for both executive and religious functions



The Imam is the Natural Leader

- As the primary face of the masjid and the one who has the moral authority in the masjid, the Imam is the natural leader of the masjid.
- As the leader, the Imam can better speak authoritatively in conveying the message and mobilizing the people.

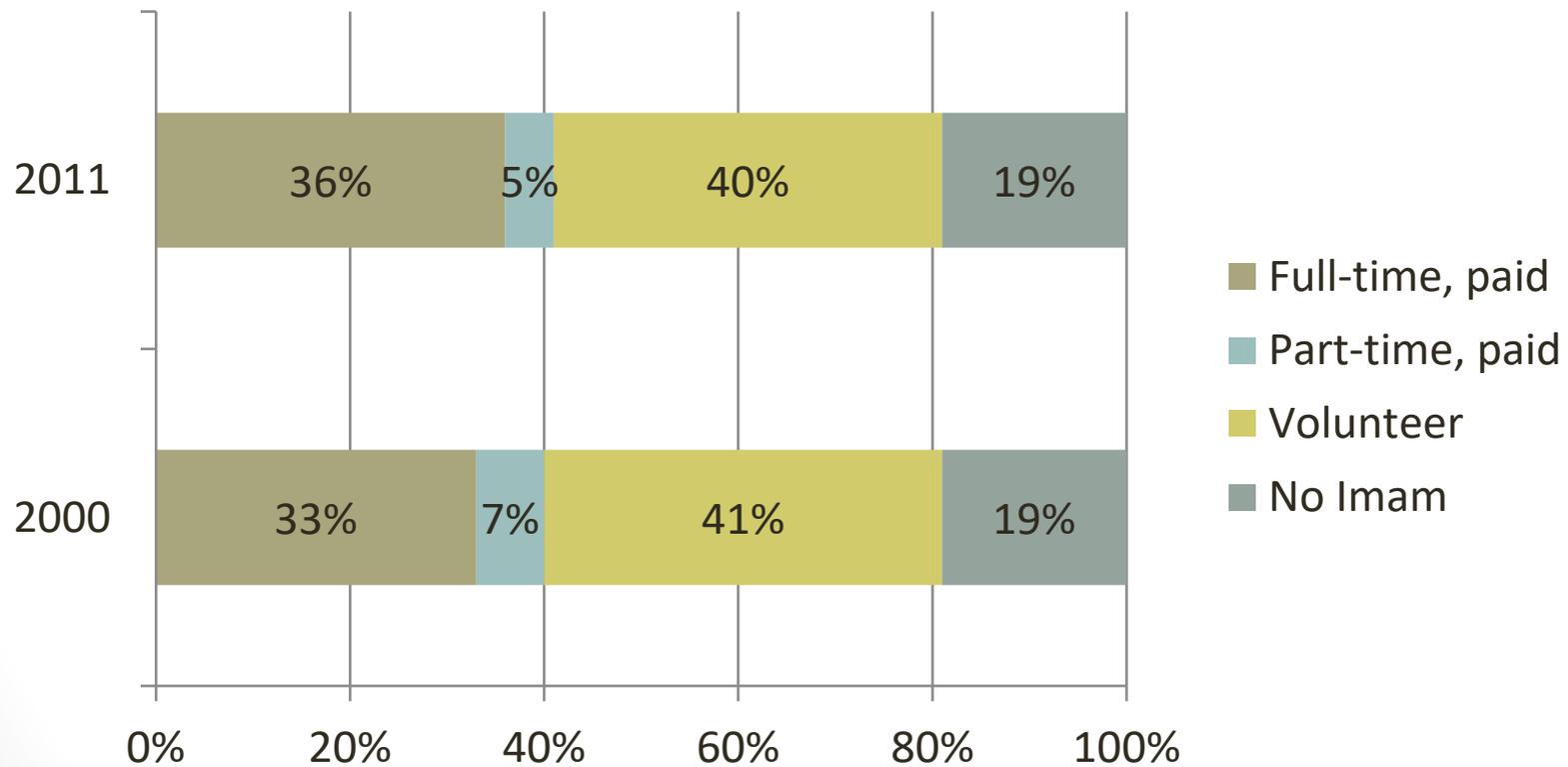
One leader is better than two

- Dividing masjid leadership between the President and the Imam is not the best arrangement in terms of organizational efficiency.
- Best practice models indicate that all executive authority should run through one person; and that one person answers to the Board.
- When the Imam becomes the sole leader of the masjid, there is no need for a President. However the Imam should not be concerned with day-to-day activities which should be assigned to an executive director, who would work under the Imam.

The problem of Imam as Leader

- Almost all full-time, paid Imams today are not born in America and not trained to be leaders of a masjid. Thus full-time Imams presently should not be the sole leader of the masjid.
- The majority of Imams are not full-time, paid.

Only 36% of masjids have a full-time, paid Imam



Only half of Imams have formal training; those who trained are trained overseas

Percentage of Imams with formal degree

- 2000 37%
- 2011 48%
- 94% of all Imams with a formal degree in Islam received their degree from abroad

Need for Trained, Full-Time Imams

- Masjids and the American Muslim community should be working to create an Islamic seminary(s) to train American-born Muslims to be Imams and leaders of masjids.
- Masjids can also work with Muslim educational institutions to provide training of overseas Imams to learn the duties of an American Imam.