

Committees: The Advisory Council's Workshop ABSTRACT

By Ralph Prince

Many times we struggle with tackling the big job because we don't know where to start or how to break the job up into manageable tasks. Committees are an effective, efficient, productive, and organized way to approach the larger task by delegating the work toward smaller specific tasks to a small group of people who have interest, abilities, and involvement in a certain area.

No doubt all of us have experiences with committees that are either very pleasant and rewarding or very negative because we didn't accomplish our goals or at least not efficiently. It is important to look at why people would join a committee in order to properly select and channel individual efforts. In "Volunteer Management 101", John Lipp list these motives why people join advisory groups: to help others, to give back to the community, to meet new people, to fill a personal void, because it is a tradition, to learn new skills, and the ability to influence others. It can be important to keep these motivating factors in mind when helping committee members find their volunteer niche.

Other reasons not mentioned by Lipp but added by others are: pressure from peers; encouragement from the workplace; and desire for power and control. These last three may have to be considered when managing certain volunteers.

Important contributions of Committees

- ***Individuals can be engaged in areas where they are most interested and skilled***
- ***Individuals can enhance leadership skills***
- ***Individual efforts are multiplied by others***
- ***Wider participation of members and non-members***
- ***Committees as a whole have wider contacts as opposed to one or two individuals***

Committees do have certain advantages and should be used when these advantages apply.

- ***Smaller numbers enhance participation***
- ***Informality can be increased***
- ***Individual interest can be channeled***
- ***Delicate subjects can be handled better***
- ***Scheduling can be more flexible***
- ***Involving just the optimum number can enhance efficiency and effectiveness***

Normally we discuss committees as either (**standing committees**) or (**special committees**) (also referred to as temporary or ad hoc).

Standing committees are those that exist on a recurring or permanent basis.

- ***Handle a specific part of the regular on-going work of the organization***
- ***Usually denoted in the organizational by-laws***
- ***Examples—Executive, Nominating, Membership (Council/Board Development), Budget/Finance, Public Relations, etc.***

Special committees are temporary or ad hoc groups that function until their specific task is accomplished. This could take anywhere from one meeting to years. Special committees should be disbanded when their mission is accomplished. No committee should exist without a mission or job to do.

There is a role for advisory leaders to fulfill at each stage of the program cycle. Every council member can be a part of the total program by being involved in a program committee. Program committees can be formed around the objectives in the county plan of work. These committees can meet outside the council meetings and/or meet as small groups during a part of the CEC meetings each time they meet. Work can be done to plan, implement, and evaluate, etc., the various educational activities within that plan of work objective. Agents and council officers plus committee chairs can give leadership to these groups. This will require efforts toward organizing, orienting and training facilitators, and empowering the groups. However, the potential to involve advisory members in programming will have tremendous

impacts—better programs, expanded audiences, leadership development, more advocacy, etc. Sometimes non-members of the council can join a committee to make significant contributions. Program committees can also take the form of a bigger nature such as a task force, or a smaller nature such as one specific activity like the CEC Safety Day at the fair.

So what is the difference in a good committee and a bad one? Here might be some key characteristics of good committees:

- Small group—big enough in size and scope to do the job but no bigger—no un-involved members.
- Complementary skills—diverse skills and backgrounds that are related to the mission
- Clear common purpose—job is effectively communicated by the larger council and understood and agreed to
- Mutual accountability—accountability exists between the committee and council and between individual members
- Trust and strong relationships—these are vital to build, take specific efforts to build and maintain, everyone's responsibility
- Open communication—the chair and each member must avoid secret meetings, clicks, inside groups, etc.
- Flexibility—one of the advantages of committees and, because of its small size, the needs of members should be addressed
- Recognition and appreciation—committees meet extra times and take special effort and should be recognized appropriately for their efforts. Recognition is also an effective way to show appreciation for a job finished, and then the group can be disbanded or new members rotated on as appropriate.

When setting up a committee, these criteria should be used for structuring:

- Size—Large groups are usually cumbersome and may suffer from a lack of member involvement. Small groups have an easier time making a decision. If the committee is too small, the group may risk overlooking significant questions or their perspective may be too narrow. A committee should be large enough to provide the required skills, knowledge, and perspectives, but small enough so that all members can be involved.
- Staffing—Staff members can provide needed background information and organizational guidelines. Who from staff will be the appropriate contact for this group? Will the committee report to the council or the staff or both?
- Membership—Membership should almost always be appointed and not filled on a volunteer basis. Interest in serving can be indicated to the council chair in various ways. Fielding a show of hands in a council meeting is an ineffective way to get the needed proper size and skills represented. Final selections should take some time and thought. Who needs to be represented? What skills are needed? Who has a particular needed insight or a relationship to certain collaborators? What council members should serve? What non-members should serve? If the group is to exist longer term, how will membership be rotated? Should there be staggered term appointments?

Stints on committees should be limited—perhaps two years if the group meets that long. Some groups may require longer terms to get up to speed. The danger of allowing members to serve extended terms is that the group may become stagnant and not generate new ideas.

- Duration—what is the expected timeline for the group to commit to
- Purpose—established by the larger council and communicated through the committee chair
- Chair—The role of the chairperson is a pivotal one. The position is not just to be a place of honor or reward for service but should be filled based on one's ability to lead the group toward accomplishing its mission.

More detail about the role of the committee chair:

- Facilitates Committee Work
-plans and leads meetings

- assigns tasks to committee members
- monitors progress and communicates with staff and council chair
- resolves conflicts among committee
- arranges for evaluation (periodic and final)
- Communicates with the General Group
 - liaison with group chair, staff, and full board
 - committee reports

As we think about those committees that stumble, the following could be the cause:

- Imbalance or concentration of power—among the chair or certain members
- Lack of accountability—among the group or with the larger group
- Unclear definition and understanding of roles-responsibility of chair, larger group, and staff
- Lack of focus on the critical issues—the committee does not set its task, that is done for them. They must address only the tasks given to them.