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Effective Use of Committees

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Effective Use of Committees

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The larger your organization, the oftener it happens that the most work is conducted by committees.

It's hard, and extremely time wasting, to convey all the necessary information to every member so that the entire group can make intelligent decisions as a total body on every issue. Your meetings will run too long, little will be accomplished, and membership will certainly fall away.

When you use committees to get much of the work done, there is no excuse for any member feeling left out or passed over. All he or she has to do is ask for or accept a committee assignment.

If this is in an area which he feels confident he can handle, he will appreciate having his abilities recognized, he will contribute, and your organization will progress.

An organized committee with well defined goals can bring several different areas of knowledge and viewpoints together for common sharing and focus on a problem more effectively than the entire group.

A standing committee is one that is normally appointed for one year or longer. It has certain stated responsibilities and may be required in the by-laws of the organization. It may perform the same task many times within the year.

A special committee (often called an ad hoc committee) is appointed to do a certain task in a specified amount of

time. When the task is done, the committee is usually disbanded.

Any committee must be free to work. The organization's officers must learn to delegate authority and work to the committee. Competent and responsible committee members need to have full support if they are to accomplish their tasks.

A chairperson with built-in drive is needed. He or she should help select the other committee members. The chairperson also needs to lead, motivate, and organize committee members to get the work done.

Selecting a committee chairperson

Before picking a chairperson define what his or her job will be. In general, a committee chairperson's job and characteristics can be summarized in the following manner.

1. The chairperson should be a motivator, not a dictator.
2. The chairperson must lead the committee into a common view of its purposes and shared responsibility.
3. The chairperson's job is to utilize the interests and release the potential abilities of all the members of his team. This means that the chairperson should be able to get things done, make decisions, stimulate others, inspire them and either know the right answers or know where to find them.

There are other important qualifications: past record of being a consistent worker who completes a job, enthusiasm, background knowledge of the organization's goals, sense of humor and perspective, confidence in other members and their ability to do things, and more interest in accomplishing the committee's job than in any feeling of personal importance.

Committee member selection

Before selecting committee members, first think about the specific purpose of the committee. Now, which people in the organization have an interest in these particular areas?

Do they have the knowledge and skill or access to the information and resources needed by the committee?

Are there people, if given the opportunity to work on the committee, who will develop a greater commitment to the organization?

Is broad representation needed on the committee? Do you need different points of view, geographic locations, ethnic groups, age groups, or economic levels?

Now you are ready to select committee members.

Select individuals willing to serve with commitment, with a positive attitude and enthusiasm.

Look for people who are able to get along, work, and communicate with others.

Select individuals who are personally interested in the issues under consideration, and who have knowledge applicable to the topic to be considered by the committee.

How large the committee should be depends on the committee's function and goes back to the importance of first clearly defining the committee's purpose.

Instructing the committee

The appointment of a committee chairperson and people to serve on a committee will not insure the development of a productive group. This takes time and effort and it doesn't just happen.

Now give that new committee some direction. Put it in writing!

1. The committee objectives should be defined and listed. For a standing committee, the objectives should be reviewed periodically.
2. All committee members should be given a copy of the organization's objectives. They need to also have a clear concept of what the committee has set out to accomplish.
3. Clearly spell out the power of the committee and the resources it has at its disposal.
4. Members should be informed as to the length of time they are expected to serve on the committee, and the time table under which the committee will be operating.
5. Each committee member should be provided a complete list of committee members with some background information on each person.

When to form a committee

The following list provides some suggestions as to when committees should be used.

1. Committees can be used very effectively in bringing together several different areas of information and viewpoints needed for finding solutions to problems that the organization is working on.
2. There are times when a committee approach can be used more effectively to disseminate information, facts, plans, and programs

simultaneously at group meetings than on an individual basis.

3. A committee approach can be used to secure a greater number of ideas and alternatives to problems.
4. A committee approach is often the best way to prevent overlapping and destructive competition from developing between organizations.
5. A committee approach is very useful when a program or plan requires the cooperation of several groups.

Frequent problems

1. A dominating outsider

A committee may want to invite in an outside person who has special knowledge to share. This is a good tactic, but there is a pitfall you should be aware of.

The invited resource person may dominate the meeting. There are at least two reasons this might occur. The committee members look to this person as the one who has all the answers; or the individual may want to promote some "pet ideas" for personal reasons.

Knowing in advance that this might happen is the best prevention. You might select a person with more objectivity.

When the resource person is contacted, carefully explain what his or her role is, and then explain it again to the committee members at the first meeting with the resource person in attendance.

Explain that the resource person is there to help, but not to make the decisions for the committee.

2. The reluctant participant

A few committee members may not participate because they are very shy

or reluctant to enter the discussion and share their ideas.

As committee chairperson, there are some things you can do to involve these people. Help them feel welcome by spending some time with them either before, during, or after meetings. Give them the responsibility of finding some information that is needed. You can also call upon them to express opinions and judgments during the meeting.

3. The over-eager participant

Occasionally a committee member will try to dominate the committee for much the same reasons a resource person might.

Use some of the same techniques. Carefully review, at the first meeting, the purposes or objectives of the committee and explain that the committee has the interest of the entire group which it represents.

If the committee member persists, give him or her a few minutes to say his piece, and then use your authority to change the direction of the discussion.

If this doesn't work, take the person aside after the meeting and in a very direct but tactful way explain that the committee has an obligation to look at all the facts and represent all groups involved.

4. Personality conflicts

Conflicts may occur between some members because of personality differences or because of differences in philosophy when sensitive issues are being discussed.

In this type of situation, permit honest differences of opinion to be aired. Cut off the discussion if it becomes personal, irrational, or if it shows signs of getting out of hand.

If things do get out of hand take a "cooling-off" break for 10 to 15 minutes and use the time to convince

the two parties that you need their cooperation and good judgment. You may also solicit the help of another committee member if there is someone who is good at mediating differences of opinions.

If the committee, after much work, cannot arrive at a consensus on some issue, note this fact in the committee report, and list both sides of the case in the committee recommendation.

5. Off-target discussions

On occasion, a committee may get off the track and spend a great deal of time on discussions not related to the committee objectives.

To help prevent this, review carefully the purposes or objectives of the committee at the first meeting. At each subsequent meeting summarize the progress and, when need be, review the purposes again. Knowing what other committees in the organization are doing can aid the chairperson in keeping the committee on track.

However, there are times when the chairperson may need to use his or her authority to keep the discussion on pertinent topics.

6. Foot dragging

There are times when the committee may want to end its discussion before the job is really done. This will probably be due to the nature of the issue and unwillingness to make controversial recommendations.

You will have to be firm. Impress upon the committee at the first meeting your desire that the committee's work be thorough and complete. Suggest areas of study which the committee will need to become involved in and then help find outside resource people to discuss problem areas and opportunities. During the discussion, take the opportunity to summarize and suggest.

Whether you are a committee member or chairperson, you will want to see a healthy committee, with the members enthusiastically participating in projects and staying involved.

Committee members need to be involved, but that means more than just making sure that each person has the opportunity to take an active role in the group. Even more important, the committee must develop an atmosphere or climate in which people want to give their full participation.

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