

Effective Committees: The Basics

Why Committees Don't Work

Typically committees don't work well for many of the same reasons boards don't function effectively: the lack of long-term agendas, reliance on poor or incomplete information, and the failure to distinguish between board level and operational issues. Therefore committees can benefit from many of the same approaches that make board meetings more effective: an overview by the committee chair at the beginning of each meeting, a strategic focus for discussions, prioritized agendas, annual calendar of committee meetings and major decisions, consent agendas, and evaluation of committee meetings.¹

Elements Of Committee Effectiveness

There are at least six elements of committee effectiveness:

- **Written Committee Description.** First, there should be a written description of what is expected of each committee to guide the chair and members. The description should summarize the purpose of the committee, its composition and selection procedure, and the specific duties of the committee. There are several sample committee descriptions in the Tool Section of this chapter.
- **An effective committee chair.** The next element is an effective chairperson. In general, the committee chair should be a board director. This helps to assure that the leadership of the committee is "in sync" with that of the board as a whole. In seeking an effective chair, we're looking for two things: content knowledge and experience relevant to the work of the committee as well as proven leadership and people skills that will be essential if the committee is to work effectively. Of the two, the most important is leadership and people skills. Additional content knowledge is more easily acquired by a committee chair than the ability to lead others.

You want a good leader of people and process, someone who feels confident in guiding committee members to accomplish the task in a timely manner. The role of committee chair requires extra work, time for communication with staff, a willingness to resolve conflicts among members, and a commitment to keep the board chair informed at all times².

There are also some personal characteristics of the effective committee chair that also need to be considered:

¹ Chait, Richard, Holland, Thomas, and Taylor, Barbara, Improving the Performance of Governing Boards, Oryx Press, 1996.

² Andringa, Robert C., and Engstrom, Ted W., Nonprofit Board Answer Book, National Center for Nonprofit Boards, 1997.

- Has confidence in other committee members;
- Wants to release the potential energy of the group;
- Is willing to relinquish some of the chair's formal authority if the job requires it; and
- Is more interested in the committee's success than in his or her own feeling of personal importance.

The good chair is one who can work with people, who can stimulate them rather than brow beat them and can help the group use all the abilities and experiences its members possess and new skills that they develop as they work together.³

The committee chair will be responsible for preparing agendas for the meetings, assigning responsibilities to committee members and doing some of the follow-up to make sure assigned work is being done by members.

- **Members thoughtfully appointed.** The next element of committee effectiveness is members who have been thoughtfully appointed. Each standing committee is generally composed of a core of five to eight members. They should be recruited with the following question in mind: What tasks are the committee responsible for and who among our members possess the skills and experience needed to complete those tasks? As is the case with other forms of volunteer recruitment, every effort should be made to match the needs and requirements of the committee and the skills, knowledge and interests of prospective committee members.
- **Accountability to the board.** The next element of committee effectiveness is clear accountability to the board of directors. This begins with the written committee function that describes what the board expects from the committee. There should also be an effort to link the committee description with relevant strategic plan language. Using a fundraising committee as an example, the committee description would reflect a major goal and supporting strategies that address the issue of association funding. Under the umbrella of the funding goal and strategies, committee leadership would develop an annual fund-raising strategy and supporting work plan in line with the funding strategic goal. This work plan would contain objectives incorporating measurable outcomes, and these measurable outcomes would be the basis for regular reporting of the committee to the board as a whole.
- **Well-run meetings.** The last element of committee effectiveness is well run meetings. In a sense, if a committee reflects the first five indicators of effectiveness -- a clear description of its work, a chair that knows how to lead, a solid match between the interests, skills and experience of individual members on the one hand, and the needs and requirements of the committee on the other, a good mix of members, and direct accountability to the board --we will have the

³ O'Connell, Brian, Operating Effective Committees, Independent Sector, 1988.

makings of excellent committee meetings. It will still be important to provide for meeting space that matches the needs of the group, a written meeting agenda and any necessary information mailed out to members in advance of the meeting.

Additional Practices to Enhance Committee Effectiveness

Evaluating Committee Meetings

At the end of each committee meeting, the chair can ask for written or oral comments about the session. In some organizations, this is a feature of every meeting and is referred to as the "check out." A relatively small investment of time can produce continuous improvements in the work of the committees. Immediate feedback from members can be solicited on how well the meeting achieved its purposes, if members stayed on task, and if there is anything that can be done to improve effectiveness of future committee meetings.

Annual Committee Calendar Of Major Decisions And Meetings

An annual committee calendar of major decisions and meetings is suggested. The committee calendar should also be tied into the overall annual board calendar so that efforts are unified and coordinated for maximum impact. Scheduling regular meetings of the committee in advance will also help busy people plan far enough in advance to assure good attendance.

Additional Suggestions

Committee effectiveness can also be enhanced through the following practices:

- Provide an orientation for new committee members.
- Make sure that committee members receive an agenda in advance of meetings and have all of the information they will need to complete their work.
- Provide regular and appropriate recognition to active committee members. The chair should also seek out unproductive committee members to find out what is getting in a way of performance and then devising strategies to overcome those barriers.
- Involve committee members in developing an annual committee plan of work and make sure that the committee plans are in alignment with the overall strategic plan of the association.

Sample Committee Meeting Feedback Form

Date: _____

Complete this form before leaving today.

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
Were the issues discussed substantive?	4	3	2	1
Were the materials provided helpful in understanding/resolving the issues?	4	3	2	1
Was the discussion future oriented?	4	3	2	1

How can our next meeting be more productive?

Based on today's discussion, what should we discuss in the future?

What was the most valuable contribution the committee made TODAY to the long-term welfare of the association, its members and the profession?

Please write additional comments below:

Sample Format: Committee Meeting Agenda

I. Call to Order

The chairperson announces the beginning of the meeting.

II.

Roll Call

Check attendance, which may be done by (1) reading a list of members aloud; (2) having assigned seats; (3) passing around an attendance sheet; or (4) having someone sign people in and out at the door.

III.

Approval of the Minutes of the Last Meeting

The appointed secretary or note-taker reads a summary of the last meeting. If there are any corrections or additions to the minutes. If there are none, the minutes stand approved, or they stand approved as corrected if changes are made.

IV.

Members' Reports

Each committee member reports to the group the progress of any activities in which he/she is involved. During reports, the members may solicit help from other members or give instructions to individuals.

V. Old Business

Old Business includes a question that was pending at the last session when it adjourned; any unfinished business that did not come up at the last session; or anything from the last session that was not completed.

VI.

New Business

New items of business are in order at this time.

VII.

Announcements

Announcements must be made before the meeting is adjourned.

VIII.

Adjournment

Adjournment ends not only the meeting but also the session. The next time the committee convenes, it must start from the beginning of the agenda.