

## **First, Let's Kill All the Committees**

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The most effective way to stop progress in an association is to form a committee. Providing member services and getting the work of the association accomplished can be done through a variety of structures – committees, task forces, councils, advisory panels, special interest groups, chapters. But often, not much thought goes into which vehicle is the most appropriate for the task at hand. The results can be ugly.

Traditional committees often are focused on executing a project or developing a policy recommendation for board approval. Often, these committees will have peaks and valleys in their level of activity. In some cases, a committee may be virtually inactive for months or years, then spring to life when a significant issue arises. Trouble is, if there is no real activity for the committee, one of two things happen: either the members get frustrated and become disengaged because there is nothing for them to do; or they create work for the committee (which is often unproductive), because they feel an obligation to do **something**. Given the increasing demands on volunteer time, getting people to participate on a committee with sporadic activity is a waste of volunteer and staff resources and frustrates volunteer participation. The current association trend is toward fewer permanent, standing committees, if there are any at all. If you must have committees, they should:

### **Facilitate the association's mission and strategic objectives**

Committees should be focused on long-term, strategic association needs, such as finance, government relations, policy, education, leadership development and the like. Their activities should be of significant impact to the association and have a steady stream of activity through the course of the year. This is not to say that the committee must be running at full throttle every month, but simply that the nature of their work requires more sustained effort and is generally work that is ongoing over time.

### **Be few in number**

Today's associations must be nimble, flexible and responsive. They must be able to act and react to an ever-changing environment. Bureaucratic committee structures are antithetical to that. Association leaders must avoid the temptation to perpetuate ineffective committee structures by mindlessly filling committee vacancies just because they are there. If your bylaws require committees that are no longer relevant, change the bylaws – fast. Failing to do so is a waste of valuable volunteer time and precious staff resources.

### **Be small in membership**

While there is no magic number, smaller committees tend to be easier to manage and can make greater progress than can a larger one. Too often, associations mistake committee membership for involvement. Just because someone is appointed to a committee, doesn't mean they are involved. And appointing someone to a non-functioning (or dysfunctional) committee can be the quickest way to lose them. Avoid the temptation to make committees fully "representative." While it is important that committee

membership be diverse, it's more important to have the right people, rather than "all" the people. Various perspectives and views can be represented without each of them having a seat at the table. The committee can (and should) use surveys, data, interviews and other research tools to ensure that it has a proper understanding of all angles of a particular issue.

Include representatives with specific talents and skill suited to the committee's purpose. Although universal representation isn't necessary or desirable, it is important that the committee include members with skills and talents that are integral to its effectiveness. Your audit committee should include members who have an understanding of financial reports, for example. Your public policy committee should include representatives who have strong knowledge of the issues facing the industry (and perhaps who have important connections to decision makers). Help your leadership make effective appointments to the committee by mining your member profiles for skills and talents relevant to the committee's work.

### **Have clearly defined charges**

Clearly defining the committee's scope of work has innumerable benefits. Obviously, it's important that the committee members have firm grasp of what it is responsible for. A clear charge also helps to define what the committee is NOT responsible for. Committees without clear boundaries too often wind up taking on tasks that are more properly the purview of the staff. Absent clear direction, committee members will fill the vacuum, often with disastrous results, including unnecessary tensions between volunteers and staff.

So if you don't use committees, how do you get any work done? There are better ways:

***Task Forces:*** Task forces are temporary groupings of individuals charged with completing a specific task – and then disappear when the task is complete. The same rules for committees apply to task forces, too. They should be small in membership and limited in scope. Task force appointments, like committees, should be made with strong consideration of the needs of the task force and the skills and talents the appointments bring to the work. They are ideal vehicles for any number of association tasks: bylaw reviews, program development, publication development, or tackling specific issues or questions the association faces.

***Special Interest Groups:*** Special interest groups (SIGs) provide a means for members with a particular interest or specialty to share information, learn best practices, and engage in dialogue. Generally, SIGs (or "practice areas") provide a forum for exchanging information, rather than executing a particular task and thus do not require any particular skills or talents in order to advance the SIG. They are often self-selecting, meaning that any member with a particular interest may sign up. As a result, they can be somewhat large in size. SIGs are ideal vehicles for organizing members by interest area, providing a convenient resource of talent to pull from for committees or task forces that are created to address a particular issue.

***Advisory Groups:*** Advisory groups are usually small teams of volunteers with particular expertise or experience in the association who can assist staff (and volunteer leaders) in executing programs and projects, serving as effective sounding boards. For example, many associations offer educational seminars. Often, an advisory group, made up of member experts in a particular subject matter, is a useful resource in putting together an effective program. It can assist in developing topics, identifying and contacting speakers, and promoting attendance. Advisory groups also can be a means of tapping into the experience and perspectives of past leaders, such as presidents or board chairs. Serving on an advisory group can be an attractive means of contributing for members who may not have a great deal of time to carry out projects, but who still wish to contribute their ideas and experience to advance the association. Like committees, the makeup of the group should be considered carefully to ensure that the advisory group is well-equipped to provide sound advice.

Volunteers are an association's most valuable asset. But leveraging that asset into your association's success requires a clear understanding of your members, an effective structure for organizing their efforts, and strong support to help them achieve their objectives. Following these tips will go a long way to maximizing that asset.