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Brain Picking

Thinking about an advisory committee

At some point, almost every organization considers forming an "advisory committee" of some sort. Despite the long history of this concept, in practice advisory groups operate with varying success.

One of the reasons for ineffective advisory bodies is that everyone understands the idea but few have taken the time to strengthen the process.

Done correctly, engaging volunteers as advisors can be a wonderful way to tap all sorts of expertise and perspectives.

Here are 10 key questions to answer when forming (or evaluating) an advisory group. Answer these thoughtfully and you will develop a winning team of supporters.

1. Do you want advice, decision-

making, hands-on help or enhanced public image?

What is the overall, long-term purpose of having this group? Even if you set about forming an "advisory council," does anyone in your organization really want advice?

Too often we want the appearance of input without any intent of using it. On the other hand, there are times when you will want to form a group of representative constituents to actually determine the next steps of a project. In that case, you are seeking decision-making, not just advice. We

also tend to call it "advice" when what we really want is a new set of workers who will fulfill tasks rather than give suggestions about what needs to be done.

One of the worst abuses of the advisory concept is as a way to use "important people, be they big donors, political figures, or simply individuals with influence." You don't necessarily want them on the board but you want them to feel "involved" enough to let the organization use their name on the letterhead. So, a place on the advisory body is offered in an unspoken agreement not to "bother" them with too much required activity.

One last way the role of an "advisory" group is abused is to use it as a dumping ground for past presidents or chairpeople, or for anyone you want to remove from an active role without insulting. This "out to pasture" function fools no one, but it does make it very hard for you to blend such nominees with people who may truly have expertise you'd like to tap.

All of these possible purposes - plus actually wanting advice - are valid, but if you do not clarify why you want an advisory body you will frustrate everyone with implied expectations that may be false.

2. What's in a name?

Once you have determined the purpose of this group, it's important to select a name that communicates this function. A good suggestion is never to use the word "board" for any body that is not in a position to govern. It simply confuses everyone to have a "board of directors" and an "advisory board" or other group with the same name. You can use a wide range of terms such as council, committee, group, task force, circle, or some term relevant to your setting.

Similarly, don't title the group "advisory" if you expect decision-making. This sort of group can be a "steering committee" or "planning council." If you want hands-on work from the members, call this a "task force" or "implementation team." If the role is solely honorary, it is more honest to call this list of names (which is what it is) "special supporters," "honor roll" or "endorsers."

3. What are the specific short-term goals or tasks you need accomplished?

The best way to recruit volunteers onto this group is to have a plan for things that need to be discussed or decided in the short term. If you can't think of anything deserving of input, maybe you don't need an advisory body.

4. Will this group be self-governing and self-perpetuating or will you be the chair? Who initiates agenda items? In general, what role do you expect to have in relation to the group?

There are no right or wrong answers here. If this is an internal advi-

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On Volunteers

sory body convened to support a particular unit or program, it may be most effective to place the staff member in charge. After all, the volunteers are already agreeing to give advice to this person, so why not acknowledge that this staffer is the logical one to propose the agenda and run the meetings?

If this advisory group is formed to assist the entire organization, you are well-advised to clarify its role in relation to the board of directors.

5. Which constituencies do you want represented or not – and why? Who – as individuals – might or might not be invited – and why?

If you want advice from a wide range of perspectives, you need to consider your options. If participants need to be from external groups, list and analyze which points of view you truly need. For an internal advisory group, do you want staff and volunteers who already know about the project and/or do you want people with uninitiated and perhaps more objective views?

6. How will you go about selecting and inviting your preferred list of members?

Will you select the candidates on your own? Whose opinion will you solicit for the best candidates? Might members of the group nominate themselves if you put out a call for in-

terested people? Might some constituent groups elect a formal representative, or will someone be appointed?

Keep in mind that people who truly want to be volunteers on this committee will probably be more helpful than those who ended up there through someone else's wish.

7. What is the "job description" of a member? Term of office? Will you want individual members to be specific advisors apart from their role in the group?

This is a critical element in the success of the advisory body. You need to define the role of a member in addition to clarifying the purpose of the group as a whole.

For example, how much time do you estimate it will take to prepare for meetings, attend meetings, and possibly do follow-up activities? Will this be a confidential position in which discussions are to be kept secret until decisions are made or will the person be expected to be an active representative to and from his/her constituent group, explaining what is being discussed and eliciting more input?

These are quite different sets of expectations, and volunteers deserve to consider such things before agreeing to serve with you.

It is also a good idea to ask for a few hours of individual time with any

advisor. If your group is purposely composed of many diverse people, you may not have the chance to hear all the points of view within a meeting. If you ask for, say, four hours of private consultation time annually from every member, you get both group synergy and focused attention.

8. Where and when will you meet, and how often? Why?

9. Will all discussions be in group meetings? Will you use electronic communication, and how? What kinds of minutes/reports do you expect – sent to whom?

These two sets of questions define your process. The answers may change from time to time, depending on the subjects to be discussed. But it is clearly important to think through how you will meet and communicate. In this technological age, you may get the most out of a group of busy people by launching an email discussion on a specific question rather than attempting to find a mutually convenient date to meet.

The good news is that you can determine the answers to these questions with your advisors, once you've recruited them. Just don't forget to do it.

10. Are you ready for a permanent group or should you begin with a time-limited task force?

If you have never had an advisory

group before, do not feel pressured to make all these decisions at once. In fact, it may be best to form a time-limited task force to help you answer the questions posed here.

At the end of this "think tank" you will have gained the advice of many people in what kind of advice – or other input – you really need on an ongoing basis. This will save you from inviting the wrong people to do what you really don't need, and then figuring out how to uninvite them later.

As with everything else in volunteerism, there are no "rules" for effective advisory councils, except to be clear on what you want and then take logical steps with that goal in mind.

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