

Dec 1, 2004

Committee Leadership

10 tips for getting the most

Every organization inevitably has committees of some sort, ranging from formal standing committees of the board of directors to ad hoc groups organizing the holiday party. People end up on committees in a number of ways, too.

Committee membership can be determined by position or function, meaning that anyone holding a particular title automatically gets a seat at the table. Members can be ordered or cajoled to participate, and sometimes people genuinely want to be there.

Regardless of how members end up on a committee, it is useful to approach the situation from a volunteer management perspective. Of course, everyone might clearly be a volunteer from the start. But even in a required-attendance committee, recognize that everyone is serving above and beyond all the regular activities and responsibilities of their personal or work lives, and has the choice to be an active or an inactive committee member.

The following 10 tips for great committee leadership derive from the principles of effective volunteer management. And, they work in all sorts of settings.

Tip #1: *Make sure you need a committee.*

Committee meetings are a fact of organizational life, yet often waste time and patience. Too many committees are formed thoughtlessly as an automatic reaction to "we have to get this done somehow."

So we gather the obligatory five to nine people together, representing all sorts of constituencies, select a chair, and expect the group to do the work. But how many people does the work

really require? If it only needs two or three efficient people, don't form a "committee."

Make a dynamic duo or terrific trio and let these appropriate people work out the tasks themselves. No chairperson is needed, either. The worst thing to do is to allow the two or three people to do the work, but force them to sit in meetings with additional committee members who slow the process down, never help, and then get the same thank you at the end.

If you do need a real committee, and often you will, consider dropping that label in favor of terms such as "task force" or "action team." It's amazing how changing the name can change attitudes.

Tip #2: *It's better to live with a vacancy for a while than to put the wrong volunteer into a key position.*

Know the qualifications you need for the work to be done and screen candidates to assure that your committee has the skills it needs. Don't negotiate away critical responsibilities to recruit someone, especially such things as attendance at planning meetings.

If you accept a volunteer who starts out telling you that she or he cannot do all that is expected, you will get less participation than you need and also irritate the other committee members who agreed to all the expectations.

Tip #3: *Interrelationships are the single biggest factor in the success (or failure) of volunteer projects.*

There is often tension between employees and volunteers - and between veteran volunteers and newcomers. Analyze the factors that might

cause resistance and clarify who is accountable to whom. Use tools like meeting minutes that record who agreed to do what, by when, to keep everyone informed about expectations and work in progress. Clarify the role of any paid staff liaison in relation to the committee. Equal partner? Clerical support? Who has veto power?

Tip #4: *Concentrate on good followership and on good leadership.*

Shared leadership is more motivating than top-down hierarchy. Define in writing the committee's goals and write a job description for committee members. After you've defined what each member will do, then develop the job description for the chairperson or other officer. In other words, it's not just the chair who has a defined role. Train everyone to initiate discussion or action and not wait for all ideas to come from the chair.

Tip #5: *Burnout of valued volunteers is the inevitable result of going back again and again to the same people.*

Develop and enforce a rotation policy for committee membership and leadership. Take some risks in recruiting members who may be new and untried. Allow experienced people to consult with a committee in short-term, specific ways without having to serve on the committee and attend every meeting.

Consider recruiting someone to be an administrative assistant to the chairperson, so that the leader can concentrate on leadership and not logistics.

Tip #6: *Be sure you are truly welcoming to newcomers.*

Do a mental walk-through of what happens to a new committee member (the process and the tone) and see if it feels friendly and helpful. Consciously orient newcomers, both with a solid set of historical materials and with an explanation of how the committee works internally. Structure time at a meeting for everyone to get acquainted. This might not necessarily happen naturally.

Tip #7: *Recognition is much more than a thank you.*

Appreciation and recognition are different. Learn to celebrate intermediate stages, not just end products, especially if your work has long-range goals. Thank people for their efforts as they move through the process. Be aware of low points in enthusiasm and do things that regenerate interest or just make people laugh and enjoy the next meeting. Even something as simple as applause for an accomplishment can lift spirits.

Tip #8: *Realize that no one volunteers to do a bad job.*

It is respectful and motivating to evaluate volunteer performance and to help volunteers do their best work. Mutually agree upon expectations and methods of reporting at the very start. Don't allow absence from a meeting to mean a member doesn't have to report.

Deal with poor performance as it reveals itself rather than waiting until it has become a problem pattern of behavior. Remember that dealing with an ineffective volunteer is a key way to make every volunteer who is doing the work right to feel supported and recognized (and vice versa).

Tip #9: *Make the most of your written communication, especially email.*

Give committee members a fighting chance to read – and act – on your mailings. Highlight, use boxes, humor, color. Use email to send shorter messages more often, faster, and at less cost. Learn to use the subject bar to assist volunteers in separating FYI emails from items that need a quick response.

Tip #10: *Insist that actions and procedures be documented so that they can be passed on to successors.*

In addition to committee minutes, it is equally important to keep track of policies made or changed, procedures implemented, sample forms developed, and other tools that will be useful to those who serve in later years. Schedule a transition meeting between incoming and outgoing chairs.

If your organization has many committees, consider holding a chairperson's institute and training everyone to implement tips such as these. You can foster a consistent approach to group work that helps everyone to get more done and treat one another better while doing it. *NPT*

Susan J. Ellis is president of Energize, a Philadelphia-based training, publishing and consulting firm specializing in volunteerism. She can be reached via email at susan@energizeinc.com. Her Web site is www.energizeinc.com