

Chairing a Committee

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Not all committees succeed in accomplishing their missions or goals. Often that can be turned around through the work of a dedicated and knowledgeable chair.

Successful Chairing for a Successful Committee

Chairs need to be knowledgeable about their committee's mission and current activities. However, during their term of service they will have many opportunities to learn about past activities and potential future efforts. Effective committees and successful chairs learn from each other.

Communication is key to a chair's success. They must be good listeners, good communicators, and good organizers. Successful chairs:

- Communicate with members and the assigned staff person regularly
- Communicate all pertinent information regarding committee activities and expectations
- Ensure all members have the opportunity to offer feedback during meetings and via email
- Encourage all members to be involved and have projects or programs to work on for the committee
- Follow up with committee members so they understand exactly what is being requested of them
- Answer all internal and external committee correspondence quickly, even if only to forward to the appropriate staff person to respond
- Praise members' efforts in writing and verbally at meetings

Forming an Active and Efficient Committee

If you are able to assist in the selection of committee members:

- Be selective
- Look for potentially good committee members:
 - Contacting leaders in the area for suggestions
 - Contact those people who have expressed an interest in the committee in the past
 - Look for enthusiastic members who have time to devote to the committee
- Ensure potential committee members understand what is expected of them
- Time commitment
- Meetings
- Committee work
- Activities
- Ensure potential members are willing to devote their time, efforts, and expertise to the committee in serving its mission
- Include diversity of age, gender, race/ethnicity, and interest among committee members

Organizing the Committee

- Establish well-defined, challenging, and reasonable projects or programs that will provide benefits to committee members or their constituencies
- Each project or program should have defined goals and objectives, specific assignments for the development and implementation of that program or project, and deadline dates for those assignments
- Assign subcommittees to work on projects or programs to spread the workload and allow a greater number of experienced and non-experienced people to participate
- When tasks are assigned, make sure everyone understands the importance and relationship of that task to other committee members' work and the project or program as a whole
- Follow up to ensure tasks are being worked on and completed in a timely fashion
- Have members report on progress during meetings
- Put each committee member on at least one subcommittee to keep them interested and involved
- Do your best to ensure that every committee member is an active and positive contributor to discussions, votes, and committee activities
- Keep an eye open for your replacement as chair from among the current and past members

Chair Programmatic Duties

- Be aware of important issues or issues that could become relevant within your committee's mission
- Seek outside expertise or input to bring to the committee if needed for specific issues
- Develop new programs, projects or initiatives to address specific issues related to the mission
- Evaluate existing projects or programs to ensure they remain responsive to the goals and objectives laid out on development
- Revise projects or programs as needed to keep them relevant to the constituencies your committee serves
- Disseminate important evaluation findings
- Be willing to cancel projects or programs that are no longer functioning or meeting needs
- Manage the committee; don't just do all the work yourself

Remember, it is the chair who, in the end, is responsible for the committee's work and must present and defend that work to a higher authority for assessment and critique.

Making Committee Meetings Productive

- Prepare an agenda ahead of time with the assistance of staff
- Distribute the agenda before the meeting to allow for any additions/deletions from committee members
- Make additional copies available during the meeting to keep the discussions on track
- Allow for committee members to introduce themselves at the beginnings of meetings to encourage collegiality and networking opportunities
- Encourage informality and the use of first names
- Conduct meetings using informal procedures except when greater formality is needed (new programs being initiated, no clear consensus from committee members)
- Involve all committee members in the discussion to allow new and restrained committee members to have a voice in the proceedings
- Attempt to keep committee discussions from becoming debates or personal soap boxes

Is the Committee Succeeding?

- One way to double-check that the committee is succeeding in involving committee members and responding to its mission is to measure the level and types of communication
- Is member participation high and growing?
- Are members volunteering for assignments willingly?
- Are assignments being completed on time?
- Are new ideas being generated by committee members?
- Are committee discussions lively but respectful to others' viewpoints?
- Do members come to meetings having read the agenda and prepared materials?
- Do they come ready to discuss items and cogently argue their points of view?
- Are they excited about the projects and programs the committee is undertaking?