

This is an excellent article on improving committee and board meetings.

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Most of the nonprofits with which I work expect their board members to actively participate on at least one committee. The expectation is that it is through committees the work of the organization will occur. However, few see committees as an expedient means of accomplishing their goals. Laurence Peter, author of The Peter Principle, echoes the true feelings of many when he facetiously suggests, "to get something done, a committee should consist of no more than three people, two of them absent."

Despite their various drawbacks, you can expect to spend a lot of time in committees, especially with the traditional concern in nonprofit organizations for people and process. Minimize your frustration and maximize your productivity by following some simple steps.

- Be clear about the committee's purpose. What does it exist to accomplish?
- Stay away from standing committees wherever possible. The urgency and importance of the committee's tasks tend to get diluted when the group meets month after month. Instead, rely on ad hoc (self-limiting) committees to deal with specific issues.
- Give considerable thought to who should sit on the committee. Look outside the board and, perhaps even, the organization. You will not only increase your chances of finding people with the specific skills you need, you will end up cultivating potential board members for the future.
- Tell people why they were asked to sit on the committee and what is expected of them. Include likely commitments of time, energy, skills, contacts and money.
- Spend some time allowing committee members to bond. People are more willing to participate and take on responsibility when they feel a commitment to the group.
- As a group, state the problems or issues to be tackled. This way everyone starts on the same page.
- Limit committee discussions to topics that fit the organization's mission, vision, values and priorities.
- **Send out agendas and preparatory materials ahead of meetings so that people can come prepared to work.**
- Meet only when there is something substantial with which to deal. There is nothing sacred about monthly meetings.
- Give people sufficient notice of meetings and try to avoid making last minute changes to the schedule.
- Begin and end your meetings on time. People are far more likely to come if they feel you respect their calendar.
- Assign tasks as evenly as possible. While it may be easier to ask the same handful of people that do everything, it guarantees that you limit participation, leadership development and potential productivity.
- Solicit then listen to everyone's input. After all, the value of committees is summed up in the adage "None of Us is as Smart as All of Us."

- Don't just accept comments at face value. Feed back the comments in your own language, applying your interpretation. Ask questions. Probe. Be sure you understand what is being said, and why it is being said.
- Assume that even the most off-the-wall ideas make sense to the people who express them. Instead of rejecting such ideas out of hand, ask for clarification.
- Don't fight over ownership of an idea. The important thing is that the idea is out there to potentially benefit the organization.
- Speak only for yourself. Let others provide their own explanations or rationales.
- Play the devil's advocate. Always ask the group to consider the downside of a pending decision. When people feel they have thoroughly looked at all the potential negatives, they are more confident of any decisions to proceed.
- Strive for consensus. While time consuming, it simplifies implementation and ensures commitment.
- Bring conflict into the open.
- Don't assume that silence means agreement in situations where decisions are being made.
- If you can't reach consensus, consider:
  - a) identifying shared interests and working to build on those;
  - b) thinking up ways to make the most promising option better or more palatable;
  - c) putting aside the solutions already on the table, restating the mission, vision and goals, and generating a new list of possible solutions that might also/better meet the organization's needs;
  - d) initiating a trial period in which the strongest option is put to the test;
  - e) changing the scope of the problem;
  - f) agreeing to limit the decision to procedural items rather than substantive.
- Stay focused on the goals and tasks of the committee.
- **Keep action-oriented minutes**
  - a) **record only resolutions and votes, not "he said",... "she said"...**;
  - b) **include sections such as *supplies to order, ideas to implement, people to call*;**
  - c) **Summarize with who will do what, by when.**
- Follow-up after the meeting.
  - a) ask committee members if they are comfortable with their decisions;
  - b) set up a system to bring those who missed the meeting up to date;
  - d) do what you promised to do at the meeting.
- Prepare a report to the board. Include:
  - a) the committee's recommendations;
  - b) the pros and cons of each recommendation;
  - c) the rationale for the recommendations made.

Following these 26 steps will ensure that your committees won't operate like those cited by Milton Berle. The comedian used to say that a committee is a group that keeps minutes and wastes hours.