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Committees can Make or Break a President

The incoming president or chair ponders an installation speech to begin his or her term of office. Concurrently it is important to be strategic about managing committees.

Associations have varied committee structures. Some prefer task forces over standing committees. Many ask board members to serve on them while others engage their members with a multitude of committee opportunities.

The purpose of committees is to supplement the work of the board. However, they become liabilities if they lose direction or load unintended projects on board and staff.

Planning a successful year includes making best use of committees. The process includes a committee inventory, appointments, alignment and charges.

Committee Management Process

- Inventory
- Appoint
- Align
- Assign
- Communicate
- Celebrate

Inventory

All committees fall under the purview of the board of directors. Committee structure is often depicted on an organizational chart.

They go by many names, including task forces, standing or ad hoc committees, councils, special interest groups, or project teams. There is a trend to engage members with shorter assignments using quick action teams and micro-tasks.

Conduct an inventory for an overview of organizational structure. Inventorying and aligning committees with the strategic plan could lead to recommendations to merge, eliminate or create new project teams.

No committee should profess to have a “life of their own,” or perpetual existence. Further it would be unlikely for a committee to establish their own bylaws or checking account then they exist under authority of the board.

Another concern is a committee that obligates the organization to a project or contract without authority. Typically committees have no authority to speak for or contract on behalf of the board.

Study the reason for each committee's existence by reviewing the missions or statements of purpose. Where purpose statements are non-existent or outdated, develop fresh descriptions to be sure every committee has a clear purpose.

Appointments

Committee leadership should be appointed in concurrence with the president's term. Get the best people in committee chairs; many will become future leaders. Appoint vice chairs for consistency if the chair is absent or loses interest.

To populate committees some associations allow the chairs to select members. Others require appointment or affirmation of members by the board of directors. Most organizations issue a call for volunteers or maintain a committee interest submission form. Membership should represent the organization's diverse interests and people.

Clarify that appointees will serve until the assignment is complete or for the duration of the president's term. A common failure is a loss of member interest and hence lack of meeting quorums.

Work Assignments

Assignments are made at the start of the term. For best results be specific about expectations, performance measures and deadlines.

No committee should start their inaugural meeting with, "What should we do this year?" Committee efforts will be aligned and assigned to match the strategic plan. They are part of a team and a breakdown will impede progress. Good governance practices suggest that committees record meeting minutes to keep staff and board informed.

Top 3 Goals for the Committee				
Committee _____		Board/Staff Liaison _____		
Chair _____		Vice Chair _____		
	Goal	What element(s) of the Strategic Plan does this goal support?	Will activity be achieved within the budget; does it generate or exhaust resources?	What performance measures and timeline will be set?
#1				
#2				
#3				

Alignment

Committees should be aligned with strategic plan goals. For example, the Membership Committee should be the champion under a goal titled, “Member Service and Value.” If there is no committee aligned with a goal the likelihood of success is low.

The association’s mission should frame nearly every discussion. An annual orientation will acquaint committee chairs with the priorities of the board.

Communications

Maintain channels of communication between board and committee chairs. They should interface with board, staff and other committees to avoid working in a silo.

Liaisons from the board and staff are important. Staff liaison serve as a resource while board liaisons champion committee work, reporting progress at board meetings. A liaison should not usurp the committee chair’s responsibilities.

Provide on-line tools and support. If no committee portal¹ exists encourage use of committee notebooks that can be passed along to successive leaders.

Accountability

Promote accountability to ensure assignments are completed. Use the TSA tagline, “If you see something say something.”

If a committee begins to melt down, lose traction or fail, the leadership will want to know before it is irreparable. Encourage volunteers to report problems promptly so corrections can be made.

Celebrate Success

Committees can achieve a great deal for an association, from solving problems to producing valuable programs. They provide opportunities for leadership development, engagement and service.

If you see something say something.

Committees are a level or two below the board. Problems may arise (lack of quorum, dominant chair) for which the board may never know. Promote the TSA slogan – If you see something say something - when a committee begins to fail. Awareness allows the president and board to make adjustments. Too many times the refrain from a president is, “I had no idea the committee needed help.”

¹ A committee portal is a site and software used to securely collaborate and share information.

Recognize committee leaders and members as they achieve results. Many will want to continue their volunteer contributions in the association.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free association governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com