

I Survived a Year On a Committee!

By Eric Westover with Bob Harris, CAE

Every organization has them—standing committees and task forces. Committees are a way to involve volunteers, benefit from their input, advance efforts and identify new leaders.

Last year I *cringed* when I was asked to serve on a committee. Before I said “yes,” I was determined to learn how to be a *good committee member*. You see, I’ve served on committees that wasted my time, had no clear purpose and succumbed to egos and politics.

Now that my year of service has ended, I can say, “I survived a year on a committee!” Let me share how I approached my committee work:

10 Committee Survival Tips

PURPOSE: My first question was “What’s the purpose of the committee?” I wanted to ensure a good reason existed for our committee. (I’m in favor of eliminating or merging unnecessary committees.)

CHARGES: Now that I knew its purpose, I wanted to be sure the committee had received a clear work assignment. What did the incoming board chair communicate to the committee’s chair about expectations and outcomes? The clearer the charge—the more likely our success.

HISTORY: I knew our standing committee was not new to the organization. So I asked the committee chairman about last year’s records. I wanted to know what had been accomplished and what work was pending. The staff gave us the prior “committee notebook.” It explained rationales and helped us avoid redundant discussions. We made a commitment to help future committees by taking good notes and keeping all of our drafts and minutes in a similar notebook.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES: At our first meeting I asked how we would measure performance. I suggested we include accountability (who, when) and quantifiability

(how many, how much) to gauge progress during our term. Everyone agreed and we achieved all of our aims within the year.

LINKAGE: Committees usually serve at the pleasure of the board. Thus, we asked how we would be expected to keep the board informed of our ideas and progress. Did they expect written reports? Would a board liaison attend our meetings? Would a staff member be assigned to our committee? We respected protocol by asking questions at the onset and viewing the organizational chart that showed hierarchy and information flow.

VICE CHAIR: We were told our committee had a chairman and he would schedule meetings, set agendas, etc. He inadvertently missed our second meeting and we sat there with no leadership, nearly wasting three hours (multiplied by 12 persons). We suggested that the chairman appoint a vice chair that would serve as a backup and could be a potential future committee leader.

TIMELINE: We set a schedule for the year. How often would we meet in person and by phone? What mid-year goals did we need to accomplish to stay on schedule? We developed a committee calendar and stuck to it.

ALIGNMENT: I knew a committee could not operate in a vacuum. We were part of a larger structure that included other committees, policies, a mission statement and probably a strategic plan. We asked for a copy of the strategic plan to ensure that our work fit inside the long-term goals. The mission statement was a reminder to stay on task; we read the mission at every meeting and included it on the bottom of the agenda.

MEETING AGENDAS: We promised that meetings would not waste our time. To that end, the chairman suggested distributing our agenda 14 days before meetings. It helped me prepare, anticipate discussions, and reminded me of items I had offered to do but had forgotten.

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Tim Richardson speaks on customer service, sales, and how to really live rich.

Delta Airlines has a motto "Good Goes Around." That certainly is true when it comes to business. I don't think you need to highlight your good deeds. If you do them with the right spirit, the "Good Goes Around" motto will eventually come full circle. Perhaps it will be in creating a more productive and happier team, or maybe you'll pick up some new members, or perhaps you'll see your giving impact your bottom line...none of those things will happen without getting your bottom out of your chair...wherever and whatever it is. ■

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MINUTES AND A FINAL REPORT:

We agreed to keep meeting minutes and distribute them promptly. This served as a reminder of our plans and progress. The staff appreciated receiving the minutes and shared them with the board chair to keep him apprised. At the end of the year, we assembled all the agendas, minutes and supporting documents to create a committee notebook for next year's group.

Not all committee experiences are so positive. Use these tips to educate your committees. ■

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