

Practical Tips for Committee Chairs

You agree to chair an important committee. In an association, chamber and charity, volunteer committees drive many of the important programs and activities. You may be responsible for policy development, fund raising or convention planning, for instance.

This advice is for the new committee chair or the member seeking a leadership position. The information divided into three parts – *before*, *during* and *after* the committee meeting.

Planning the Meeting

Meeting Notices

Give members notice well in advance of meetings or set the schedule for the year and stick to it. Committee members will be more likely to prepare and follow through if they see the big picture of meetings and deadlines.

Charge

It would be difficult to chair a committee if you did not know what the president of the board of directors expected of the group. If he or she has not charged the committee with specific, measurable goals, then ask for clarification or set your committee goals and clear them with the board president.

Time Management

Committee members' time is valuable. Let them know this by thanking them for attending and showing respect for their time. Start and end your meeting on time. If work isn't completed within the meeting timeframe, suggest a conference call in the interim. Make every minute count.

Committee Composition

The board president will appoint or recommend members, or the committee chair will have that responsibility. The committee should be composed of *willing* volunteers, including a balance of diverse members representing various interests, geography and cultures within the organization. The committee should not be perceived as a clique. A word about overly large committees and "dead weight." If as the committee chair you cannot figure out why some people volunteer without commitment or even showing up for meetings, speak to the organization president about replacing the deadwood with more effective members or pare down the committee to a manageable size.

Orientation

Committee volunteers will appreciate a short briefing at the start of the year to learn what is expected of them. For instance, how many meetings will be required, are expenses reimbursed, how many hours will they need to give? This is also the time to indicate that though everyone is a volunteer, accountability and follow-through will be required to serve the committee.

Subcommittees

To accomplish more work on a timely basis, consider appointing subcommittees from among your members. A subcommittee or task force is smaller, more agile and can get the work done faster in many instances.

At the Meeting

Seating

Don't miss the opportunity to plant yourself in the best seat at the table. That's not usually hidden in the corner or crowded among members. You want to be seen and have room to spread out – take advantage of the *power* of seating by arriving first.

Guests and VIPs

From time to time you may have a guest, past president, or non-committee member sit in the meeting. Treat them with respect by making them feel welcome and introducing them to the other members.

Agenda

The agenda keeps the meeting moving. It serves as a guide for committee members to gauge how long the meeting will last and how much discussion each item should receive. A meeting without an agenda allows for rambling discussions and sidebar chatter as members wait for the next topic.

Forms

It may help to have forms that make record keeping easier. Committees use forms to record motions, for sign-in rosters, for taking minutes, and to report to the board. Consider the forms that will best serve your needs and streamline the work.

Flip Chart

A flip chart offers multiple purposes – some of them psychological. You may need to take charge of a meeting by walking to the flip chart to make a point. Or you can emphasize a point by using it to outline a plan, draw a chart, or create a calendar, for example. Another use of a flipchart is for the member who likes to spout ideas but seldom offers any details. Ask him or her to outline the idea on the flipchart, which usually silences them or helps to make their point.

Performance Criteria

Every committee project can be measured in various ways. For example, if the project is education – are you seeking to generate revenue, position the organization, or enroll new members? Each volunteer will have a different perspective that you as chairman will want to take into account and then set criteria for determining success.

Minutes

Committees should use minutes to report to the staff and board on actions and to record commitments, deadlines, and action steps. *The chairman is too busy to run the meeting and take the minutes*, so seek a volunteer willing to actively listen and take good notes.

Diplomat and Traffic Cop

As committee chairman, you'll have to keep members focused. If sidebar conversations develop, bring attention back to the agenda and pertinent discussions. It's OK to ask that cell phones be silenced and discussions stay focused.

Take Action

Simply stated, "Actions speak louder than words." Read the minutes of your last meeting. Are they simply reports and discussions – or do you see a clear course of actions steps and progress?

Summarize

Every agenda item creates discussion. It is important that the chairman summarize what is understood for the group. If someone says let's raise the fees and another member says we should offer discounts – it is up to the chairman to bring about consensus. Try something like, "those are good points, what I think I hear you saying is we should offer seminars that make money for the organization but are discounted for members."

Calendars

Bring a calendar to the meeting – it's an important tool for setting project deadlines and planning activities. It's easier to discuss the next meeting with a calendar in site than to say you'll be announcing the meeting when you get back to your office.

Handouts

Give members the information they need for decision making. If it's a contract to review, make enough copies to distribute – don't just read it to them. The same applies to agendas and other documents. By distributing information in advance volunteers can review and prepare for your meeting.

The Big Picture

The chairman must envision the organization's overall "big picture" (i.e. strategic mission and goals) and how the committee's work fits in. Try not to look at each goal as a successive project (one activity to achieve before tackling the next), but how you can advance the goals simultaneously. For example, if you are charged with developing several educational seminars...don't just plan one per quarter but schedule a full year of seminars, sponsors and speakers.

Rules of Order

Rules of order are encouraged. They don't have to be formal but the position of chairman should be respected, motions should be made and seconded before debate, and members should be recognized before speaking. Chaos develops if everyone speaks at once.

After the Meeting

Reports

As a committee leader, there is a responsibility for keeping the board of directors and staff informed. The best way to do this is by written reports provided to the organization's president and executive director within 10 days of the meeting. Let them know of decisions, progress, needed resources, and when the next meeting is scheduled. Keep your committee members well informed by copying them on the reports.

Interim Efforts

Check the progress of committee work in between formal meetings. Set up a mechanism for having committee members and subcommittees report on their progress. If you don't hear from members, remind them of their commitments and the need for accountability to achieve the committee's goals.

Closure

The best chairpersons leave a legacy. That means they achieve the goals set by the organization, they encourage the committee members to take on leadership roles, and they pass on important files and folders to the next appointed committee chair. Leave time to personally brief the new chair on achievements, pending work and recommendations. It is the chair's job to "package" the committee and present it so he or she will have a running start.

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