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Set Ground Rules for Committees

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First committee meetings of the year? Start by setting ground rules as the foundation for involvement, processes and achieving outcomes.

Discuss these perspectives with committee volunteers then make a list of agreed upon ground rules.

Mission – Know the mission statement, it frames the work of the committee. Find out if the board of directors has delegated tasks or if a committee is expected to develop its own projects. Keep the mission visible during meetings and printed on agendas.

Agendas – If there is a reason to meet there is a need for an agenda. The agenda facilitates discussions and provides timeframes.

Time Management – Volunteers are busy. Agree to start and end meetings on time.

Rules of Order – Committees may be less formal than board meetings; but they do need a sense of order. Conversations should be directed through the chair and recommendations made in the form of motions.

Preparation – Meeting outcomes are improved with preparation. Members should make time to read reports, ask questions and potentially politic in between meetings.



Listen for Comprehension – Many people listen with an eagerness to inject their opinion. Hear people out, holding responses until the issue is clear.

Digital Distractions - Turn off digital distractions, or silence them during meetings.

Respect People and Ideas – A committee is composed of diverse people with varied ideas. Insist on respect.

Establish a Vision – The committee's work should conclude with desired results. The chair should communicate a vision of what success looks like.

The First 60 Days - The first 60 days of work will pave the way for success the rest of the year. Initial work includes meetings with officers and staff, interfacing with other committees, reading governing documents and identifying resources.

Alignment – Work must align with the association's strategic plan. Have a copy of it at meetings to reflect how committee work advances the goals.

Meeting Environment – The meeting room and seating arrangement can impact outcomes. Set it up to facilitate meaningful conversations, in a comfortable setting, with minimal distraction.

Communication Protocols – There are lines of communication and authority that should be recognized. Check for policies on committee operations. When communicating, think strategically about who should be included; avoid email fatigue.

Attendance – Volunteers should be committed for the duration of the appointment. Expect that if meetings are regularly missed one will be asked to resign or be re-assigned to a more fitting task.

Assignments – Expect assignments. Be accountable for tasks to avoid delaying progress.

Beware of the Black Hole – Avoid conversations that take the meeting into a "black hole." They waste time and distract from achieving results.

Clarity – Recommendations will be made for consideration by a board of directors. Be absolutely certain proposals are clear so the board can take action without sending it back to committee with questions.

Boundaries – Respect boundaries; areas where the committee has no authority. It is not a forum for fraternization.

Wordsmithing – To be efficient as possible agree that once a subject is discussed to a certain level that the committee can move on. Details can be tended to by staff and consultants after the meeting.

Agree to Disagree – Discourse is healthy, not every decision will be unanimous. Committee members must support the decisions without resentment.

One Voice – After meetings, members are expected to support the decisions of the majority. The place to express dissent is inside the meeting – not after adjournment in a public forum or barrage of emails.

Guidelines are the foundation for good committee work.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance resources at www.nonprofitcenter.com. Credit to the SCCOAR leadership for helping to develop these guidelines. Photo credit CSMAOR board.