

When Did Committees Go Out of Fashion?

A frequent question of association executives is, “Can you tell us how to get our committees to work?” It is followed by descriptions of declines in volunteering, do-nothing committees and committees that act without authority.

“We had some unproductive committees that did not advance our agenda and counterproductive ones generating ideas outside our mission. We have eliminated most standing committees, preferring focused task forces instead,” explains Chris Isaacson, Executive Vice President at the Alabama Forestry Association.

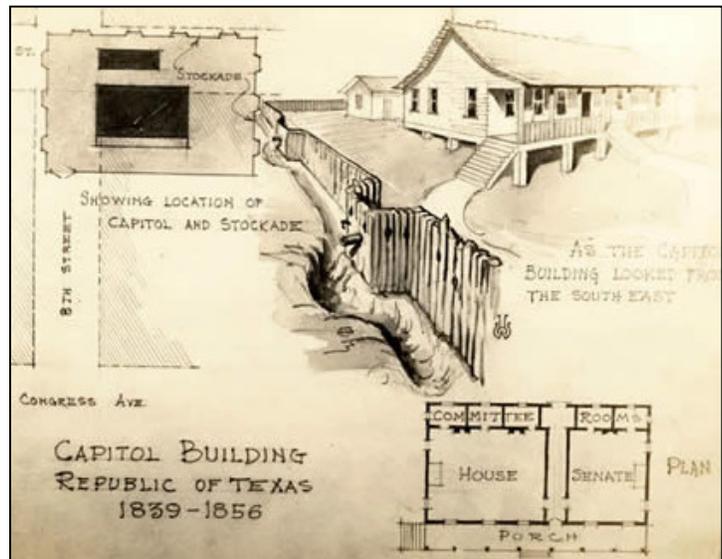
History

Governing bodies have relied on committees for centuries. The results can be powerful.

On June 11, 1776, Congress appointed a committee of five to write the Declaration of Independence. They operated for four weeks or until the Declaration was published on July 5th. It could be said they were an expeditious task force.

In another example, an architectural drawing of the Texas state capitol circa 1839-1856 designed the building to incorporate five committee rooms adjacent to the House and Senate chambers.

Always, the intent of committees has been to make the best use of talented persons willing to give their time to advance issues and solve problems --- supplementing the work of the board of directors and staff.



Waste of Time?

I've known committees that produced significant results. They have written books, created certification programs and passed legislation. They've been the source of inspiration and created future leaders.

Adversely I've listened to committees that start with the question, "What do you think we should do this year?" The group thought they'd brainstorm to come up with new projects for staff.

Problems arise when the chairman provides no agenda, dominates conversations, advances a personal agenda or the meeting lacks a quorum. Or when members arrive only for lunch, offer minimal input, and frequently check watches for a quick departure.

One way to lose a dues-paying member is to ask him or her to participate on a committee that wastes time. Members have described attending meetings where the chair arrived late, there were no resources and no decisions were made.

Equally bad are calls for volunteers that lead to dead ends. Members agree to sign up but receive no more information, which may imply, "we don't want you."

Talent, Direction and Leadership

Talent, direction and leadership are elements of thriving committees.

Talent – Volunteers bring talent to the committee table. Their role is not to simply listen in hopes of gaining insider information.

For example, a Government Affairs Committee has 40 persons who attend to gain first-hand information. The composition leaves the committee short of persons with the skills to monitor legislation, draft laws and lead coalitions.

- **Call for Volunteers** – Maintain a roster of persons willing to volunteer. The clearer the purpose statement for each committee, the more likely the right persons will volunteer. Describe the amount of time required. Explain how volunteer work and leadership can be advantageous.
- **Assignments** – Get the right volunteers on the right committees. Identify their interests and competencies, then recommend a good fit. Most importantly, if they volunteer, respond to their offer. It is belittling to call for volunteers and



then ignore them.

- **New Models** – Volunteers have limited time. Committees are transforming into micro-tasks and quick action teams. Volunteers prefer a clearly defined timeline as opposed to a year-long standing committee. The trend is fewer standing committees and a reliance of task forces that disband upon completion of their assignment.
- **Mergers** – Some organizations appoint committees because, “We’ve always had that committee.” Be sure there is a need for every committee and they align with the goals of the strategic plan. It may be politically difficult, but some committees can be eliminated or merged.
- **Communication** – Keep the members informed. Though a committee may meet infrequently, it needs a flow of information. Invest in the technology to allow online collaboration. Keep everyone informed of progress.
- **Outsource** – Why appoint a committee when outsourcing the task can be more efficient? For instance, a Bylaws Committee can take six months to do what an attorney could do in days.

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Direction – Committees fall under the authority of the board and direction of the strategic plan. They need clear assignments (expected outcomes) and should have a statement of purpose.

It is common that committees will “wander,” sometimes expanding their workload without necessity or authority. For instance a Governance Review Committee is charged with making recommendations about two paragraphs in the bylaws. At the first meeting they expanded the charge to review the entire bylaws and policy manual, to examine 10 years of history, to analyze the interface of leadership and staff, and a study of similar organizations.

- **Purpose Statement** – Every committee should have a purpose statement; a sentence or paragraph to narrow the focus. Without a statement, a “Membership Committee” might expand its work to member benefits, recruitment and retention, campaigns and member awards.
- **Current Year Charges** – “When it is in writing it is more likely to be achieved.” The chief elected officer or the board should precisely define assignments for the committee. Narrow the focus to only one to three charges for the year.

- **Strategic Plan** – Nearly every endeavor should support an aspect of the strategic plan. Committees should recognize they are advancing the organization’s strategic plan. Failure to perform will endanger the success of the plan.
- **Vision** – A committee should have a vision to define what success looks like. For example, “By our final meeting we will have reviewed all the certification test questions and presented a report to the board.” Vision should influence nearly every communication, discussion, report and outcome. Without a vision momentum wanes, members lose interest, and the group begins holding meetings for the sake of holding meetings

Leadership – Committees require leadership. The appointees are responsible for planning and chairing an efficient meeting and be the visionary for engineering how results will be achieved. Committees are often the forum for developing future leaders.

- **Chair and Vice Chair** – Appoint both a chair and vice chair (or co-chairs). When the chair cannot attend, loses interest or is transferred, the vice chair can assume the role.
- **Liaisons** – Committees need a connection to the board. The role of a board liaison is to champion the committee’s positions and work to the board of directors. The role of a staff liaison is serve as a resource.
- **Orientation** – Include committees in the annual orientation process. Just as board members benefit from an improved understanding of the organization, so do committee chairs.
- **Organizational Chart** – Depict the lines of communication between board, staff and committees with an organization chart.
- **Technology** – I smile when I hear a board from a relatively small state say, “We can’t get our committees together because of driving distance.” The opposite are global organizations with committees that manage across multiple time zones and languages to produce results. Integrate technology into committee meetings so members can participate without the drive time and have access to information 24/7.
- **Succession** –The committee leadership should maintain records so that the successive leaders will understand the work of the prior year and be able to pick up seamlessly where the committee ended.

The suggestion for this article came from a meeting of the International Association of Optometric Executives where I was asked, “Do you have pixie dust for committees?”

A guide to **Committee Responsibilities** is available at <https://www.dropbox.com/s/0rc8ofd1fxdv9ps/Committee%20Responsibilities%20%20pg%20Guide%202014%20RUSSIAN.pdf?dl=0>

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

COMMITTEE RESPONSIBILITIES

Committees are an integral part of successful organizations. Their purposes include: supplementing the work of the board and staff; engaging members; and developing leaders. The *Committee Responsibilities* guide clarifies responsibilities, authority, recommendations, smart practices, trends and risk avoidance.

<p style="text-align: center; background-color: #ffffcc;">Types of Committees</p> <p>Standing Committees are identified in the bylaws and serve the duration of the year.</p> <p>Subcommittees divide work amongst subgroups.</p> <p>Task Forces and Ad Hoc Committees are appointed for a specific purpose. The committee disbands after completing the assignment. Because volunteers have limited time, consider using task forces or Quick Action Teams (similar to task forces but even shorter duration.)</p> <p>Councils, Think Tanks, Brain-Trusts, Strike-Forces and Special Interest Groups are other committee names, often created to engage persons with similar interests, such as practice speciality, geography or ethnicity.</p>	<p>Use a vice-chair or co-chair for sustainability. The position supports the chair and may become next year's leader.</p> <p>Committee liaisons serve as an advocate and champion. A board liaison is the communication channel between the committee and board. The staff liaison is a link to management and resources.</p> <p style="background-color: #ffffcc;">Alignment in the Organization</p> <p>Committees have a “fit” within the organization. Each has an explicit purpose often identified in the governing documents (bylaws, policies or committee purpose statements.)</p> <p>Efforts of the committee should align with the organization's structure, strategic goals and resources. An org-chart will depict hierarchy and the relationship to the board and staff.</p>	<p style="background-color: #ffffcc;">Outcomes and Recommendations</p> <p>Committees should produce <i>results</i>. For example, instance, creating new educational content, programs, publications, fund raising, a robust special interest section or enhancements in the organization.</p> <p>Most efforts by a committee will require approval by the board. <i>Recommendations</i> should be in the form of a motion or resolution. A request to the board should be explicitly clear so that directors understand and approve.</p> <p>When setting committee goals, be realistic about what can be achieved. Break projects into monthly or quarterly steps.</p>
<p style="background-color: #ffffcc;">Chairs and Liaisons</p> <p>Every committee needs leadership.</p> <p>The chair should have the best understanding of the purpose of the committee and the immediate tasks. He or she sets the tone for achieving results and engaging volunteers. The chair should be able to communicate a clear vision and desired outcomes.</p>	<p style="background-color: #ffffcc;">Trends in Committees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are no “sacred cows.” Is the committee necessary? Elimination of standing committees in favor of task forces. Committees are all aligned with the organization's strategic goals. Technology use, on-line meetings and committee web portals. No silos. Committees should interface with other committees to collaborate. 	<p style="background-color: #ffffcc;">Committee Resources</p> <p>Resources take the form of time and money:</p> <p>Finances – The annual budget may have allocations for committees.</p> <p>Time – Consider the value of a committee meeting by multiplying the # of persons involved x the length of the meeting x \$50 hour wage/vale (minimum).</p> <p>Information – “Read to Lead.” Know the mission, bylaws, policies, strategic plan, budget and organizational chart.</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; font-size: x-small; margin-top: 5px;"> <p style="text-align: center; color: red;">“Some committees keep minutes and waste hours.”</p> </div>

ASSOCIATION CHECKLISTS

- Incoming chief elected officer considers committees 90 days before taking office.
- Only essential committees are appointed.
- Consider alternatives to standing committees, i.e. task forces, quick action teams, strike forces and volunteer micro-tasks.
- Each committee aligns with goals in the strategic plan.
- Every committee has a (1) purpose statement and (2) current year charges.
- Appoint leaders who are visionary and good meeting managers.
- Committee leaders are included in orientation.
- Performance measures are set.
- Liaisons connect committees to board and staff.
- Committees are aware they do not speak for or act on behalf of the board.
- Achievements of committees will be recognized, celebrated.
- The transition to successive committees (next year) should be seamless.