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Committees: Raison D'être

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At the first meeting of the committee one of the members said to the chair, **“So what should we do this year?”** The chair responded, “We don’t make up our own agenda. The board has assigned tasks that will help them advance the strategic plan.”

Raison d'être, from the French, meaning reason or justification for being or existence. This article addresses committee management.

Committees are intended to supplement the work of the board of directors and staff. Through their efforts, ideas and resources, they bring fresh ideas and energy.

Committees should not take on a “life of their own” whereby they create their own bylaws and checking account. Seldom do they have authority to speak for or contract for the organization.

Deploying Committees

Standing committees are identified in the bylaws and serve for the duration of the current term. Ad hoc committees, task forces and others forms are appointed for a specific assignment; disbanding upon completion.

Rarely do committees, their chairs and members serve in perpetuity. Their service should end with the successive election when the incoming chair-elect or board makes new assignments.

For each committee that will be deployed, brief purpose statements are adopted. These statements may be documented in the organization’s policy manual or a comprehensive “guide to committee responsibilities.” Their efforts should be framed by the purpose statement and further defined by current-year assignments made by the board.

The trend is to reduce the number of committees, especially standing workgroups. It can be difficult to find volunteers. Committees require stand and board oversight. Thus standing committees are being replaced by short term workgroups described as quick action teams, strike forces and micro-tasks.

There is no use for a group that meets without an agenda or designated purpose. Volunteers are quick to express dissatisfaction when attending meetings that

have no purpose.

Alignment

An organization's board periodically reviews the committees to consider their need and how they align with the strategic plan. Committees may be merged, eliminated, reinvigorated or repurposed.

Most organizations seek alignment between their strategic goals and the committees. For instance an organization with five goals in the strategic plan may be 5 to 10 committees to advance the goals. For example, a goal of "Influencing Public Policy" is likely to have a government affairs committee and a political action committee.

There is an expectation that committees will produce results. For example, creating content for a new educational course, a model position paper, or a valued member benefit, etc.

Descriptions

Committee descriptions are similar to an organization's mission statement. The work of the volunteers will be framed by the description or purpose.

These descriptions are examples for the most common committees.

- **Affiliates** – A method for engaging associate members involved in the organization but not as "regular members." Gives them a voice so their needs may be met and opportunities afforded for greater support and involvement.
- **Awards and Scholarships** – Makes recommendations for awards and recognitions and handles the selection process with integrity.
- **Board Development** – Frequently a nominating committee is responsible for identifying a slate of qualified board candidates and ensuring the election process is maintain with integrity. The charge of a nomination committee has expanded to include nominations, board evaluation, and an orientation process.
- **Bylaws** - Responsible for reviewing and maintaining the governing documents and for recommending amendments. Often chaired by the elected secretary. Precaution: Appoint the committee as needed to avoid a bylaws committee making changes for the sake of change. May be supplemented with an attorney consultant to ensure compliance with law.

- **Conference and Expo** – Frequently a large portion of an organization’s budget is related to an annual conference. The committee works through the year or longer to ensure a relevant, respected annual conference and trade show. The oversight of the committee might warrant appointment of subcommittees for assistance.
- **Education and Training** – Ensures the quality and promoted diverse delivery methods to increase member competencies and compliance. May be tied to official continuing education requirements or maintaining educational designations.
- **Ethics** – Positioned to handle complaints that may arise from consumers or between members. Based upon having a code of ethics or conduct. As a result of hearing complaints and concerns, may confidentially transition the problems into educational classes to help members comply.
- **Executive Committee** – Authorized by the bylaws and responsible for making decisions in the interim between board meetings. Composition usually includes the elected officers plus one or two key leaders – for example, the immediate past president or the paid executive as an ex-officio position. The committee should be careful not to usurp the authority of the board or to appear to scheme; transparency is key.
- **Finances** – Oversees processes and policies that guide and protect financial resources, including investments. It is often chaired by the elected treasurer. In some organizations it doubles as the audit committee responsible for interfacing with the independent CPA reviewing the finances.
- **Fund Raising** – If the organization relies on grants and gifts, there may be a committee charged with fund raising to supplement regular streams of income.
- **Government Relations** – Often the most active committee, it has responsibility for identifying issues, developing positions, influence and engaging members through grassroots efforts.
- **Member Benefits and Services** – Considers the portfolio of member benefits, return on investments compared to dues paid, and monitors the “member experience.” It may review affinity-endorsed benefits, and seek a meaningful benefit or service that acts as a “golden handcuff.”
- **Membership Growth** – Focuses on recruitment and retention. Often considering missing segments of membership and creating campaigns for growth (may be combined with Member Benefits and Services.)

- **Past Presidents** – An opportunity to engage past presidents with special projects assigned by the current board.
- **Public Relations** – Supplements the staff in branding, messaging and public relations efforts. Where members are not experienced in effective PR, this committee is often supplemented or replaced by a PR consultant.
- **Strategic Planning** – Responsible for the process for developing a strategic plan. The committee's work may be expanded to monitoring and reporting on the plan's progress and key performance metrics.
- **Technology** – With the evolution of technology it is difficult for staff to entirely monitor needs and opportunities. There is continuous need to invest in the technology that supports organizational functions and outreach. Millennials are often a driving force on the technology committee.
- **Young Professionals** – Composed of young and emerging professionals with an interest in having a voice and taking on special projects.

An organization wants to be confident in its use of committees. A good start is to ensure they understand their purpose and assignment.

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

Sample Committee Descriptions 11-16.doc