



# KEY TO EFFECTIVE COMMITTEES

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Student Organization Development Center

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1310 Michigan Union University of Michigan 763-5900

For many the word "committee" has a negative connotation. It conjures up images of:

- people sitting around not knowing what to do. (a waste of time; unclear goals; lack of focus).
- one or two individuals or a clique dominating the discussion and doing whatever they want (poor leadership; hidden agendas; motivation by self-interest).
- the work never getting done or when it finally does and the committee reaches a conclusion nothing comes of it. (lack of follow-through on assignments; inconsistent commitment; no action taken; leadership unresponsive to the committee).

If the above seems all too familiar then this handout has been written to help you turn your committee into a productive group.

Let's look at the positive aspects of a committee. Most are formed to resolve a problem. They do the majority of the organization's work thereby relieving the busy leadership of many details and activities. Their smaller size makes it easier to convene at a convenient time and to handle complex or controversial subjects. Their structure is usually more informal than the organization's and provides more opportunity for the individual members to fully participate. Because most committees have "hand picked" members chosen for their skills and interests, the members are likely to be sincerely interested in their task and have had access to a wide range of contacts and resources to accomplish their mandate. They are able to capitalize on the previous experiences and training of a more representative sample of the organization. Finally, committees can provide a superb training ground for emerging leaders.

## Selecting Committee Members

In order to come up with the best possible solution, it is important that the committee consist of a representative group of people. Choose committee members to represent different points of view and concerns. Try to have a mix of new and old people. This allows for new ideas and input at the same time providing leadership. Some facts to keep in mind are:

- Who has interest in the purpose of this committee?
- Who has the knowledge and skills and/or access to information and resources needed by this committee?
- Are there people who will be compatible and work well together?

- Are there members that could become more committed and involved in the organization by being appointed to this committee?

### Organizing a Committee

When forming a new committee it is important to carefully consider both its structure and membership. As the organization's leader, be very clear about the committee's purpose, limitations and jurisdiction. To ensure that the members have accurately understood the committee's intentions, ask them to define their mandate using their own words. Next, have them determine how much time and commitment each can give, then, select a meeting time and length and stick to it.

For a committee to function successfully it is important that all members feel that they can openly and honestly express themselves. If this atmosphere is not there, the committee will not be operating at capacity and their problem-solving will be inadequate. To create a positive environment and facilitate productive interaction among members, it is often helpful to spend time identifying everyone's concerns.

Ask the members for their perceptions of the group's needs and problems. Then, as a group, form a plan of action that adheres to your goals and objectives. A helpful problem-solving process is to:

- see the difficulty
- recognize and then define the problem at hand
- consider all possible solutions
- gather all the information being sure to get help from additional people and resources when appropriate.
- select and prove the solution

Furthermore, groups need to have operating procedures. Defining roles and selecting a good chairperson helps to guarantee that you will be successful and reduces ambiguity. Be sure to include guidelines on how the committee will function and provisions for change if the original ones prove to be dysfunctional or inappropriate. When setting these guidelines keep the following in mind:

- How will meetings be run, i.e., norms, procedures?
- What will be the decision-making process, i.e., majority vote, consensus?
- Will members work as a group or as individuals?
- How can you ensure that members fully participate and discuss the issue(s) at hand or raise their concerns, i.e., formal proposals, open meetings, discussion time?
- When differences arise (and they will!) how will they be solved?

- How will assignments be made and who will do the delegating?
- What will be the process for follow-up on obligations?
- How will changes be made if you find that you're not producing results, i.e., evaluation processes?

In conclusion, if you follow these guidelines it is likely you will have a committee that works effectively. It will:

- understand its purpose and effectively work toward the goal
- have open communication among members; participants will feel comfortable articulating their feelings, attitudes, and ideas without redress
- listen to both the majority and minority points of view and then make decisions that are acceptable to all the members thus ensuring commitment
- not be dominated by its leader or any group of members
- strike a balance between group productivity and the satisfaction of individual needs
- establish and use a review process thereby identifying its problems and suggesting appropriate solutions
- provide an opportunity for members, many times from differing factions, to work cooperatively; give opinions; collaborate on solutions; test the feasibility of potential solutions; and share the responsibility of working together as a unit.

You might find these other SODC handouts helpful to you and your organization:

- How to Run an Effective Meeting
- Team Building
- The Role of a Secretary and Minute Taking
- Orientation for New Members
- Parliamentary Procedures

Thank you for your interest in Effective Committees. For more information on this topic or other leadership or organizational issues, stop by the Student Organization Development Center (SODC), 1310 Michigan Union. The staff is available on a walk-in basis Monday through Friday, 12:00 - 5:00, or call for an appointment, 763-5900.

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