

# KEY TO EFFECTIVE COMMITTEES

The general purpose of any committee is to determine, through its collective wisdom, the best solution to a problem that is then recommended to the parent organization. The key word is collective. Through discussion of a problem, a committee is able to arrive at solutions that are usually superior to those of any one member.

Committees are the backbone of the organization. They provide the careful study and analysis that allow the parent group to make the correct final decisions. This handout will help your organization to benefit the most from its committees.

## **The “Good” Committee**

Effective committees don’t just happen – they are a combination of a good purpose, a good leader, and good members.

**A “Good” Purpose:** Nothing ruins a committee’s efforts like the lack of a meaningful purpose. Without a clearly stated, reasonable set of goals, the committee will not have the focus it needs to be successful. Some organizations suffer from “committee-itis” - too many committees. It’s no wonder that a committee without a purpose usually gets nothing done! When should you form a new committee? Permanent committees should be formed to handle work that is a regular major part of the organization’s function (i.e. social committee). Temporary committees (sometimes called task forces or ad-hoc committees) should be formed for a project or task that is only a one-time deal. Make sure that the job really requires a committee – will it interfere with the normal functioning of the group if no committee is formed?

**A “Good” Leader:** The leader of a committee must realize that the success or failure of that committee rests squarely on his or her shoulders. The primary duty of the leader is to guide the group’s discussions. S/He should encourage every member to participate in the meetings and keep track of the discussion, which should be focused on the matter at hand. Don’t let the debate get sidetracked. Meetings should start and end as scheduled, and the agenda must be followed.

The leader is also responsible for the interactions of the members. Committee members should be given the opportunity to get to know each other. The group will work better if the members are familiar with one another. If two members don't get along well (or get along too well), the leader must not allow those members to impede the flow of the meeting. A quick solution is not to allow the conflicting people to sit near each other. The leader should make sure that every member is well informed regarding the committee's purpose, schedule, and agenda.

***“Good” Members:*** Committee members should be carefully selected. These are the people who will be solving problems for the whole organization. They should be somewhat knowledgeable in the area of the committee's responsibility. Members should be a diverse group without being incompatible. Try to get people with different opinions on the committee – when these people agree on a solution, you know it's a good one!

Studies have found that the optimal size of a committee is around 5-7 people. This is apparently the number of people that can be taken into account at one time as individuals. Remind members that they should be receptive and open to new ideas and other people's opinions. Work is accomplished in a committee through the give-and-take of an open, honest, uninhibited discussion.

Committees can and should be an integral part of every successful organization. A committee with a good purpose, a good leader, and good members will be on its way toward success – success for the committee, its members, and for the parent organization.

Source: Dean of Students Office  
California State University, Fullerton (9/99)

Revised: July 2011 / LM