

Working With Committees

How do effective committees function? Do they contribute to effectiveness and productivity? Do members willingly serve on committees? Do assignments distribute the workload and actively involve many members? If your answers are affirmative, committee work in your County Extension Council rates high.

Committees greatly influence the growth and prestige of an organization and, to a large extent, determine how well it accomplishes its goals. If you are concerned about committee performance in your organization, the ideas discussed in this publication may be of help.

What Is a Committee?

A committee is a group of people selected from a population, community, or group to study or act on a particular matter.

The Council sets limits within which a committee must operate. These include the committee's task, length of time for the task, available resources, and the purposes and policies of the Council.

Why Have Committees?

Effective committees can help the Council accomplish its work and develop leadership among the members.

Committees can be effective for accomplishing much of the organization's work because:

- Individuals can do the kind of work in which they are interested and for which they are suited.
- Organizations can benefit directly from the experiences and abilities of more members.

- Wider member participation results in member support and commitment for the organization's goals.
- The informality and procedures of the committee provide a better working atmosphere than is present in large groups.
- A small group can operate more effectively than a large one when a range of alternatives must be screened or when delicate or sensitive subjects must be considered.
- Committees work for the Council between meetings of the larger group.
- Committees provide information needed for decisions and help the Council accomplish more work in its meetings.

Committees may properly be viewed as a training ground for the Council's future leaders. The small number of people on committees enables each member to have an active part. New skills gained through committee work prepare the individual for additional leadership responsibilities.

Types of Committees

Standing committees handle a specific part of the Council's ongoing work. The organization's bylaws or standing rules usually provide for them. Terms of office for committee members usually coincide with that of the organization's officers, although some groups follow other patterns.

Most organizations need only a few standing committees. The membership committee, the finance committee, and the program committee are among the standing committees found in many volunteer organizations.

Special committees or ad hoc committees are set up to perform a specific short-term task. When the job is finished, the committee is discharged. These committees enable the Council to involve additional members in assignments for which they have a special interest.

A special committee's purpose or membership is not defined in the Council's standing rules. A motion to appoint the committee should state the committee's job, the number of members, and the method of appointment.

Requirements for Good Committee Work

Three basic requirements for successful committee work are the right problem, the right people, and the right process. Effective work results when qualified individuals work as a team to accomplish a task the group feels is important.

The Right Problem

A problem recognized by the whole organization and clearly defined to the committee is the basis for productive work. With special committees, the problem or need usually has been recognized. However, unless the Council reviews periodically its need for standing committees, some of them really may not be needed. Such committees often are low performers, which tend to lower the standards for the organization's work. The Council should examine its committee structure from time to time and eliminate unnecessary committees.

The problem or assignment must be clearly defined for both special and standing committees. Provide the committee with written instructions, including a clear statement of the assignment. The Council may choose to use an instruction sheet. The sheet includes:

- Name of the committee
- Type of committee (standing/special)

- Committee purpose
- Specific duties/responsibilities
- Names of chairperson and members
- Time of reporting
- Budget

Written instructions, however, do not relieve the president and the chairperson of their responsibility for instructing the committee. Instead, written instructions are a reinforcement of explanations provided when the committee was appointed.

The Right People

When the need for the committee has been defined, the next step is selecting members. This requires matching committee requirements with the best people for the assignment. Usually, the Council president appoints committees. The County Extension Council works with the Council president on this task.

Keep in mind several important considerations when selecting committee members.

- Which individuals are especially interested in the committee's task?
- Which members have the special information or skills the committee needs?
- Which members could benefit most in terms of personal development by serving on a committee?
- Which members might develop more commitment to the Council's goals by serving on a committee?
- Which members have access to resources needed for a specific committee?
- Which members are already overloaded with other assignments?
- Which members work well as part of a team?

Keeping in mind the committee's purpose and the above considerations, the president should:

1. Determine how many people are needed.

The bylaws may specify this for standing committees. For special committees, it is sometimes included in the motion authorizing the committee. However, in many cases, this decision is left to the presiding officer.

The committee's assignment is the major consideration in determining the number of members needed. Some assignments require a large committee representing all major interests in the organization. Other work may best be accomplished with a much smaller group – three to five members. Since group discussion and idea sharing are important in committee work, five to fifteen members make a productive work group for most assignments.

2. List prospective members and select the best qualified person as chairperson.

Select the chair because of his/her ability to organize the individuals into a working group. The chair may or may not be the person with the most knowledge about the committee's topic.

3. Obtain consent of the prospective chairperson to serve in this role.

Select other members, considering any suggestions the chair may make, and get their consent to serve.

Sometimes people in volunteer organizations hesitate to accept committee assignments. Minimize this reluctance by using a positive approach when contacting prospective members. Give specific information about the assignment in a personal manner. Members usually accept assignments when presiding officers are honest about the job requirements and help individuals understand why they are

needed. Individuals who have full knowledge of what the job entails tend to be good committee members.

The Right Process

Productive operation requires that a plan be followed whereby each member can make the maximum contribution. If the committee has not been oriented and instructed adequately at its appointment, do this at the first meeting. At this meeting, the group should agree on intermediate goals and working procedures.

The president of the Council should know of all committee meetings and should attend when possible. An exception is the nominating committee. This committee is elected and the president should not attend its meetings.

Because of size and informal atmosphere, committees usually do not use formal parliamentary procedure. Attention is focused on the job rather than on rules. Although rules of parliamentary procedure are dispensed with, members should still adhere to the intent of the rules. Decisions should be made in a democratic manner on the basis of full information and free discussion. The committee chair may take part in the discussion although he/she should not dominate.

The chair sees that the committee accomplishes its task. However, success rests on the group's ability to work as a team. The following points help make committee work a satisfying, productive effort:

- 1. Provide a meeting place and facilities that contribute to an informal atmosphere.** A small room with table and chairs permits a face-to-face working arrangement. A chalkboard is useful for recording points under consideration.
- 2. Prepare a written agenda for each meeting.** The chairperson plans the agenda based on what needs to be accomplished and on suggestions by committee members. A committee agenda should be more flexible than for larger group meetings.

3. **Prepare for committee work.** Planning meetings at times convenient for members, giving notice of meetings well in advance, providing members a copy of the agenda or other assignments for study before the meeting and arranging for resources needed by the committee are examples of preparation contributing to productive meetings.
4. **Delegate responsibilities to committee member.** Responsibilities carried out during meetings may include the duties of secretary, chalkboard recorder, timekeeper, summarizer, evaluator, and resource advisor. Responsibilities for tasks to be done between committee meetings may also be assigned to specific members.
5. **Help members participate at meetings.** The chairperson should draw out those who hesitate to contribute and curb others who tend to dominate. Members participate more readily when the meeting is informal and relaxed.
6. **Keep minutes as the basis for the committee's report to the organization.** Standing committees usually make recommendations and progress and annual reports. Special committees make final reports; they may also make progress reports and recommendations.
7. **Prepare and submit reports as requested by the organization.** Standing committees usually make recommendations and progress and annual reports. Special committees make final reports; they may also make progress reports and recommendations.

The chair usually reports orally with a written copy provided for the secretary's records. Always submit written copies for annual and final committee reports.

The Council may choose to use a form to help committees report their work. The form includes:

- Name of committee
- Date committee appointed

- Name of chairperson and members
- Number of committee meetings held
- Brief description of how the work was done
- What the committee found and conclusions reached
- Recommended follow-up action by the organization

Committee reports including this information provide the Council a good basis for action on recommendations. The end product of most committee work is reached only when the Council takes appropriate action on the report.

The Council may act on committee reports in different ways. Reports may be:

Received or filed. The Council is not committed to recommendations of the committee when reports are handled this way. Progress reports may be received without a vote. The chair may merely acknowledge receipt of the report and ask the secretary to file it.

Adopted or approved. This action binds the Council to the entire report, including opinions, conclusions, and recommendations.

Rejected. The Council may accept or reject all or any part of a report.

Presented and action postponed. A decision on a report can be postponed, but the date for consideration should be specified.

Returned to committee. The Council may feel additional work or information is needed before final action.

Referred. A report may be referred to the executive board or to another committee. For example, a report may require study to determine whether it is in harmony with the Council's policies or a financial report may be referred to the auditing committee.

Both the committee and Council are responsible for seeing that the report is understood, considered and acted on appropriately.

Conclusion

Everyone profits from good committee work. The Council reaches more of its goals, future leaders receive valuable training, and committee members enjoy the satisfaction of accomplishment. However, good committee work does not just happen; it results from deliberate study and effort.

The County Extension Council should consider seriously how its committee work can be improved. Leaders and members are encouraged to study this publication and use ideas that will improve committee performance.

Information in this publication includes adaptation of ideas from Committee Common Sense by Audrey R. Trecker and Harleigh B. Trecker and North Central Regional Extension Publication No. 18, *Committees – A Key to Group Leadership* by Sheldon G. Lowry.

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