

The Establishment and Effective Use of Committees

On-Demand Webinar

Committee Meetings

Board Effect

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**How to Run a Board Committee Meeting**

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Board meetings usually have jam-packed agendas. It’s nearly impossible to dedicate enough time to thoroughly vet and discuss every agenda item. When board discussions take up too much of the board meeting time, it’s generally best to move the item to a committee for further research, problem-solving and discussion. [Committees](https://www.boardeffect.com/blog/committee-member-nonprofit-board/) have the ability to tackle one issue at a time and to give an agenda item the time that it demands.

Well-run committee meetings require a skilled chairperson who can clearly outline and communicate to the other committee members what they need to accomplish. Committee members work together to produce a comprehensive report and final recommendations for the rest of the board. Committee work saves the board time while helping them make progress toward achieving the board’s goals.

**What Causes Committees to Be Unproductive?**

Boards may have a few standing committees where the work is ongoing. They may also appoint ad hoc committees that have the responsibility for tackling a specific issue. Some [committees are poorly run](http://www.tripbuildermedia.com/2017/05/committees-top-five-principles-committee-effectiveness/) and accomplish little or nothing. As a result, they contribute nothing to the rest of the board. Many different things can occur in committee meetings that contribute to poorly run committees.

One of the most common issues for standing and ad hoc committees that are unproductive is that the committees aren’t clear on exactly what it is that they are supposed to accomplish. Board committees can solve this problem by getting clear instruction from the board as to what they need and having a skilled committee chair who can lead the committee toward accomplishing its goals.

Another issue with committees is that some members rely on incomplete or outdated information. A well-rounded committee will know how to find the best resources to complete their work. Committees function much like boards. Members shouldn’t be afraid to ask challenging and pointed questions — and should be willing to hear opinions from various perspectives.

A skilled chairperson is instrumental in facilitating committee meetings by keeping things on track, encouraging all members to attend and participate, and helping the committee to arrive at a consensus.

**What Helps Committees Remain Productive?**

To remain productive, committees should have either a written committee charter or committee description. The description should state its purpose, duties and the length of time the committee stands. The description may also include information about the composition of the committee, which includes the committee chair, committee members, the board president as an ex-officio member and professional experts.

**A Qualified Committee Chair Helps Keeps Committee Work Productive**

The person appointed to serve as committee chair should be a board director. It should be someone who is committed to keeping the board updated on the committee’s work. The board chair usually appoints the committee chair based on their content knowledge and their experience of the committee’s purpose.

A [skilled committee chair](http://www.ala.org/yalsa/sites/ala.org.yalsa/files/content/aboutyalsa/yalsahandbook/effectivecommittees.pdf) possesses strong leadership and communication skills. Much like with the responsibilities of the board chair, the committee chair should be able to keep the meeting flowing smoothly and [follow the committee’s agenda](http://www.diycommitteeguide.org/resource/running-effective-meetings). The committee chair should be able to help draw out various perspectives from the members, tapping their knowledge, expertise and energy. As conflict and differing perspectives arise, the chair should be able to work with the committee members to resolve them.

The [committee’s work](http://cnmsocal.org/featured/what-are-board-committees-and-what-do-they-do/) should be in line with the organization’s policies, which is also a responsibility of the committee chair. As the committee makes decisions and takes votes, the committee chair makes sure things get recorded appropriately.

Committee members often perform research and other work outside of the committee. The committee chair is responsible to assign tasks to committee members and to make sure they follow up on their duties.

At times, a committee chair may need to relinquish some of the direction of the meeting to a professional expert in the matters the committee is working on. An ethical committee chair will be most interested in the committee’s success over any degree of self-interest.

**How Do Boards Select Committee Members?**

The board chair typically selects members for committees, making sure that the appointees have the necessary knowledge and skills to participate in discussions and to complete assigned tasks. Committees can be large or small, but typically have about five to eight members.

Committee members should be prepared to answer the board’s questions about their work and be able to show measurable outcomes for their work. Committee members should be chosen for their abilities to relate the committee’s action plan to the board’s strategic plans and goals.

**Tips and Strategies for Productive Committee Meetings**

During the very first committee meeting, boards should clarify their decision-making process, whether it will be a vote, consensus on a written summary or report to the board, or something else. Making this step the first order of business will alleviate any confusion or miscommunication as the committee proceeds with its work.

The committee chair should find out the best times and days for committee members to meet, form a schedule and give it to all committee members as soon as possible. This should help to keep attendance strong.

It may be helpful for the chair to provide an orientation for new committee members. It will help them know what to expect at the committee meeting and get them up-to-speed, if needed.

The committee chair should draw up an agenda for all committee meetings and make sure committee members have it and other materials well in advance of the meeting. This document contains a [sample committee agenda](http://www.ala.org/yalsa/sites/ala.org.yalsa/files/content/aboutyalsa/yalsahandbook/effectivecommittees.pdf).

Committee chairs should be considerate of their members’ time. It’s prudent to [start and stop meetings on time](https://www.501c3.org/10-practical-things-you-can-do-this-month-to-enhance-your-board/) and to put time limits on agenda items, if necessary.

The conflict of interest policy applies equally to committee members as it does to board members. The committee chair should be on the lookout for any potential conflicts of interest. The process for handling conflicts of interest is the same as for a board meeting. The committee member with the conflict must declare the conflict and abstain from any voting on related matters.

Committee members want assurance that their opinions and perspectives are valued. The board chair should be willing to openly recognize significant contributions and members who make major contributions to the committee.