

# Leadership: *Committees*

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A committee is a small group of people representative of a larger group, assigned a particular task. Committee members are appointed or elected, or they may volunteer. An ideal size committee for most tasks is three to five people since they, in turn, can delegate work to others. If the task is large enough, they may delegate work to the total membership of the entire group.

The first person named to a committee is usually considered the chairperson, unless otherwise specified. Some committees elect the chairperson.

The committee is a small, informal version of the parent organization and should conduct its business as such: through a chair, with an agenda, keeping minutes, adding needed members, writing a final report, moving its adoption, and accepting any decision of the parent organization.

There are two main kinds of committees. **Standing committees** handle certain tasks specified by the parent group. Examples are membership, finance, and program development. These will usually be specified in an organization's bylaws.

**Special committees** are selected for a particular job for a specified time and should be officially dismissed with appreciation after the job is done. They may have special assignments such as fact-finding, planning, advising, coordinating, making recommendations, writing resolutions, performing needed action, or carrying out special activities. Some of these special committees may function for 10 minutes during a meeting, while others may have a task requiring weeks.

Conducting small group discussions is a form of committee work, when the group reports to the membership as a whole.

Ad hoc committees are usually unofficial and are set up before action committees.

Informal committees often start ideas that are officially activated later.

Committee of the whole is when the whole organization works together on membership or other tasks.

## Advantages

A committee has many advantages:

- With a small number of people, there are more opportunities for each member to take part. Therefore, committees can work more effectively on many tasks. For this reason, it is wise to keep committees relatively small. Of course, the size of the committee is determined by the nature of the task and the nature of the representation needed on the committee. When numbers become too large, it is often more effective to divide the total task among subcommittees who, in turn, report back to the larger committee.
- In a committee, the procedures and, in fact, the whole atmosphere can be more informal. There is less need for strict, formal rules. Therefore, individuals are likely to discuss more freely and to make a greater contribution.
- If members are "hand-picked" for the job, committees are more likely to have people interested in the task at hand. Larger groups are often hampered in progress because they are more likely to include individuals who are not interested in or are unfamiliar with the problem.
- Committees can handle delicate, embarrassing, or controversial subjects more easily than a large group.



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- Committees are more flexible in their ability to hold hearings and to consult outside experts or authorities.
- It is much easier to convene a small group than a large one.
- A small group can operate more efficiently, particularly when there are many choices available. For example, they can narrow the number of alternatives the larger membership needs to consider.

## Selecting Members

In selecting committee members, remember the contribution that participation on committees can make to the organization and its members. If you were concerned only with getting a particular job done, selecting committee members would be easy. However, there are other important considerations:

1. Who has an interest in the things the committee will be doing? Interest and willingness to serve are main considerations.
2. Who in the organization has the knowledge and skill, or access to information, the committee needs? Give special consideration to people with special training, experience, or aptitude for the task.
3. Which person could benefit most by working on the committee with members who have had more experience? Don't overlook the opportunity to provide the experience of learning by doing. As shown before, committees offer a real opportunity to train potential leaders—and we should recognize that every member is a potential leader.
4. Are there individuals who might develop a greater sense of belonging or commitment to the organization by working on a certain committee? A significant, constructive experience is an effective way to develop dedicated membership.
5. Do you need a representative committee? Three major kinds of representation often need consideration: (1) different opinions or points of view; (2) different organizations or agencies; and (3) different geographic locations. The nature of the committee's assignment determines whether any or all of these factors need attention. Therefore, every committee need not be "representative."
6. Which members have the best access to the resources needed to do the job? While this point is an important one, be careful not to overload certain key individuals.
7. Are there some individuals who will work together more compatibly than others? People who have demonstrated their unwillingness or inability to work together normally should not be assigned to the same committee.
8. Does the chairperson of the committee have any preferences as to whom she or he would like to have on the committee? Because so much responsibility rests with the chairperson, often it is a good practice to ask for any suggestions she/he may have. The

procedure does not give the chairperson the right to select her/his own committee, but it does give her/him the opportunity to recommend members.

As you can see, you do not leave to chance the selection of committee members—this would invite inefficiency and low productivity. At the same time, the selection need not be a matter of undue concern. With some thought and consultation among the executive officers of the organization, you can select most committees with little difficulty. In general, the more important the committee, the more care is required in selecting its members.

A committee member should be one who:

- Will be interested in the kind of work to be done.
- Will honor the appointment and commit to do the job.
- Has special skills needed for the job.
- May be trained as a potential leader or as a supporting member.
- Represents special opinions, organization, or location.
- Has not been overloaded with conflicting commitments.
- Is compatible with other members or will cooperate.
- Will be useful to and desired by the chairperson.
- Will contribute to the group.

## Chairperson

More care is needed in selecting the chairperson of a committee than in selecting its members. The chairperson does not simply call and conduct the meetings; this person's primary responsibility is to give leadership to the group and to stimulate them to their highest productivity, individually and as a group.

The chairperson need not be the one who knows most about the topic at hand, but should be able to organize the individual members into a working group. The individual may never have served as a committee chairperson before, but it will help if one has served on a committee or has had similar experience.

The chairperson is chosen for ability to lead the group. The one who proposes an idea is not necessarily the best choice for a chairperson, but neither should she or he be disqualified—either to be the chairperson or a member of the committee.

## Size

The purpose of the committee is the main thing to consider in determining how large it should be. If the purpose of the committee requires wide representation, the group will be somewhat larger than one whose task requires the efforts of only three or four people. Remember, the major reason for appointing a committee is the advantage of the greater efficiency and flexibility of a smaller group over a larger one. Size, therefore, is determined by the number of people needed to accomplish the purpose of the committee.

## Committee Instruction Sheet

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of committee: \_\_\_\_\_

Type of committee: ( ) Standing ( ) Special

Purpose: \_\_\_\_\_

Specific duties and responsibilities:

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Chairperson's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address and telephone number:

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Committee members:

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When to report: \_\_\_\_\_

Budget: \_\_\_\_\_

Coordination with other committees:

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