

Making committees work for you

What is a management committee for?

The management committee is defined by the Charities Act of 1960 as those people who have general control and management of the administration of a charity or organisation. It acts as the governing body of a voluntary organisation and makes all final decisions. It relies on a body of staff or volunteers to keep members informed and run the organisation on a day to day basis. The committee has both a managerial responsibility to see that the organisation works towards its stated aims and objectives and a legal responsibility to check the body works within the law and according to its constitution.

Who will be on the committee?

People volunteer for committee work for a wide variety of reasons but primarily because they have become involved with an organisation or an event and want to do something worthwhile towards its future success. Managing committees effectively means recognising why people became involved, it requires a combination of organisational skills and an understanding of the members. Leaving everyone to do what they like doing might feel appropriate when working with volunteers, but it is not necessarily the way to ensure the group is run efficiently. You need to explore the skills of the people on the committee and match them to the jobs which need doing within the group. Remember that the committee members need to get something out of their role in the committee too, whether it be an increased sense of ownership and belonging to the organisation, social networking or new skills.

Why bother with committee meetings?

Committee meetings form an important part of most voluntary and community groups' work. They keep committee members in touch with the work of the organisation and mean that both power and responsibility can be more evenly shared and identified. The secret of successful committees lies in finding a balance between a democratic process which allows free expression and an efficient way of making clear decisions.

Meetings which are badly managed are unproductive, expensive and a waste of everyone's time. [See Effective Meetings] The best committees will make use of all the various talents brought to the organisation by individual members, however, most of the work traditionally falls to the Secretary and Chair. It is their job to decide the purpose of the meeting, what needs to be discussed and the likely or desirable outcome.

The role of the Secretary

A good Secretary is worth his or her weight in gold. When organising committee meetings it is the Secretary's job to manage the practical side of things.

- To book a suitable room and arrive there early to make sure everything is arranged appropriately. Make sure there are toilets available, arrange tea and coffee if this is required and ensure the access is appropriate for all the group's members.
- Ensure the meeting is called in accordance with the organisation's constitution. Make sure enough notice is given and minutes of the last meeting are circulated as appropriate.

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- To draw up an agenda. If in doubt use the following checklist:
 - include the title of the group or committee and the date, time and place of the meeting
 - arrange items for discussions in order or priority, ending with "any other business" and check with members first to make sure there are no extra items they wish to raise.
 - describe each item in enough detail for members to prepare in advance of the meeting.
 - enclose the previous meeting's minutes as well as any reports to be presented by members.
 - enclose any reports which will be discussed at the meeting, or say they will be circulated on the day if they are not yet available.
 - indicate if items are "for information", "for discussion" or "for decision".
 - include copies of presentations to be given
- Writing up the minutes
 - take brief, accurate notes under each item heading and leave a few lines blank between each item so that you can add notes if members refer to it later in the meeting.
 - note what action is decided on and who is to carry it out. This can be put into an action column on the right hand side of the typed up minutes.
 - make up draft minutes as soon as you can after the meeting, while it is still fresh in your mind. If you are in doubt about anything check with the chair or a member of the committee. Never throw your notes away until after the next meeting, in case there is a query about the minutes you have taken.
 - when the Chair has checked your minutes, circulate them as soon as possible to members. Check with the constitution of your group whether they are to be circulated as a reminder with the agenda for the next meeting.

The role of the Chair

The task of chairing meetings may seem daunting to first timers but it is important to remember that very few people have the skills to act as Chair naturally, they are learned skills. The basic tasks which fall to the Chair include controlling discussion in meetings, making sure everyone has the chance to speak and ensuring members keep to the timetable. The overall running of the committee must be shared by the whole group, it is not the Chair's one man/woman show and they are not a mind reader. Feedback is needed from members and decisions can always be put to a vote if there is disagreement.

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Good Chairs need to remember to:

- involve new members from the start by introducing them to everyone in the group and ensuring they have the chance to speak. A group which has existed for some time will have its own style, customs and catch phrases. If you do not involve first timers they may not come back.
- summarise the purpose of the meeting at the start to give the group a clear steer on what will be discussed.
- ask members for facts first, then opinions.
- summarise the discussions at each stage of the meeting.
- guide the meeting with questions to ensure everyone can participate.
 - open questions eg "What experiences have you had ...?"
 - overhead questions eg "Has anyone ever come across this before...?"
 - relay questions eg "That's an interesting question, how do the rest of you feel about it?"
 - direct questions eg "I think Mr X experienced this..."
- make sure they keep up to date on all the matters on the agenda.
- Learn about body language so that you can tell when a committee member is bursting with good ideas and draw out those who are more shy.

- Check you have a consensus, saying: "We seem to have reached an agreement, does anyone have something to add or shall we move on".
- Delegate where appropriate - you can't do everything and should not try.

Organising the meetings

Don't have too many meetings, three or four annually should be enough for most organisations, too many meetings can tire out members and waste time.

It is up to the Secretary and Chair to organise the Annual General Meeting. Never hold this on its own, have drinks or food, or add it onto a performance evening or debate. Twenty minutes should be enough for most AGMs if proper minutes and accounts have been prepared and circulated in advance.

Try to get new people on the committee each year to keep a supply of fresh ideas.

The Good Committee Member

A good committee member will, first and foremost, turn up for meetings and arrive on time. You need to read the papers well in advance, think about the issues which are being discussed and make notes of what points you wish to raise. Make sure you have the information you need to make an informed decision. Talk to people about the information before the meeting if you feel it would help to clarify or explain some issues.

It is inevitable that there will be disagreements and conflicts but remember to keep personal issues out of the equation, and accept that once

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a decision has been made by the committee you should accept it and work towards implementing it, whatever your initial feelings were. Listen to others during the meeting, follow the debate and have your own say at a suitable time. Do not be afraid to speak, you are on the committee for a reason and the fact you are there means that your opinion is valued.

The committee meeting should be an exchange of views between all members, not a chat between pairs of friends, so make sure everyone feels as at ease as is practical. Learn the difference between assertive and aggressive behaviour - make your point without being domineering and encourage others to contribute without being patronising.

Evaluating Committees

Every committee works in a different way but whatever your organisation's committee culture it is important to assess how well the committee is working. Factors such as personality clashes, the influence of traditions which are seen as sacred and so not challenged or the lack of confidence among newer committee members can go undetected but will be shown up by an assessment process carried out once every two or three years. Research shows that the most common reasons for dropping out of a voluntary group include disillusionment, disagreements within the group, uneven division of work and pressures at home. By evaluating these factors you may be able to hang on to valued committee members.

Evaluating committee structures will also help you to acknowledge changes which have taken place in the organisation. Just because

something has been done a certain way for years it does not mean it is still appropriate now. Remember committees are made up of people and as people and circumstances change, so should committees.

One of the best ways to assess committees is with the use of a self-assessment form like those highlighted below. It is important the process is not seen as a threat by members of the committee, and it is best carried out by someone other than the Chair. Once the forms are completed a special meeting of the committee can be held to discuss the findings and agree what action, if any, should be taken.

See the Sample Committee Evaluation Form. Use this form as the basis of your own evaluation techniques and add new questions to fit with your own structures or pinpoint any problems you feel need addressing.

Try drawing a picture of the way your committee works. A quick examination of the group dynamics can show up fundamental problems instantly. Does your committee fit any of the patterns pictured below?

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Moving Forward with your Committee

Meetings work best when the committee functions as a team so it can be worthwhile investing in some team building. By getting to know each other's talents and tastes you will find it much easier to work together.

When groups are working together they often go through four distinct stages.

- Forming - when they begin, committees are groups of individuals with a common interest and no collective identity or established working practice.
- Storming - working patterns are new and constantly challenged.
- Norming - establishing accepted patterns of work and behaviour which will be passed on to new members and become part of the furniture of the committee's meetings.
- Performing - with all of that out of the way, the group can now do what it was formed to do and becomes productive.

Remember - no practice is set in stone, and if something is not working you should change it. Review the work of your committee regularly and act on the results of any evaluation process.

Further Information

Volunteers on Management Committees, by Rodney Hedley and Colin Rochester, published by the Volunteer Centre, UK.

The Role of Board Chairperson, by Eugene Dorsey, NCVO

The Community Groups Handbook, by Maggie Pearse and Jerry Smith, Journeyman/CDF (1990)

Just About Managing, by Sandra Adirondack, London Voluntary Services Council

Voluntary but Not Amateur, by D Forbes and J Reason, London Voluntary Services Council.

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Other Related Information Sheets

Organisation (Capacity)

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