



## EFFECTIVE USE OF COMMITTEES - QUICK TIPS

*Five quick tips for understanding the best ways to convene, task, and work with committees.*

### *Different Kinds of Committees*

- Understanding the differences between various kinds of committees can help you assure that committees you appoint or work with accomplish their goals and stay productive. Elements to consider include:
  - ✦ Standing versus Temporary
    - \* Is the committee needed to address an immediate and temporary concern (e.g., responding to a call for proposals, a search for a particular position, or a current challenge), and should cease to exist once their goal is accomplished; or is theirs a more permanent function, making necessary decisions on a regular basis (e.g., a curriculum committee, executive committee)?
  - ✦ External Agenda versus Latitude
    - \* Is there a specific agenda imposed externally, which largely defines the committee's work, trajectory and conclusion? Or, is the task to be considered one with more latitude, in which the group can or should generate their own concerns and agenda, examine different ideas, explore issues, and propose solutions?

### *A Good Committee Starts with a Good Letter of Appointment*

- A well written letter of appointment helps to prevent misunderstandings and provides all involved with a clear purpose for the work to be done. The letter should be kept, and provide a coherent picture of the intended scope of the committee's purview.
- While a committee should be prepared to be flexible, the focus should be on the specifics outlined in the letter of appointment. If the letter is not written with enough specificity, the committee can end up wasting time on tangential directions and not accomplish what it was initially designed to do—or wander far afield.
- The letter should address the expected deliverables and propose a timeline for the work of the committee. It should be discussed ahead of time with the chair of the committee and, if appropriate, with the committee itself.
- Asking for regular status updates on the progress of the committee can be helpful for projects that are longer term or particularly complex.
  - ✦ It is often customary and helpful for the person appointing the committee to attend the first meeting, to go over the letter and to discuss it with them. This does not always apply for standing committees, although it can also be helpful there.

### *Consider the Membership of the Committee Carefully*

- A committee should be comprised of people who will take the topic seriously and give it the time and attention it requires, who are well versed in the material or have some relevant expertise, who can work well together, and without preconceived biases. (Or, if a particularly difficult topic on which many “firm” options exist, the committee must be reasonably balanced so competing views will be surfaced and heard.)
- Depending on the appointment of a committee, diversity among the committee members is often an important factor to consider:
  - ✦ Ethnic, racial, and gender representation can be particularly important for hiring and tenure committees.
  - ✦ Sometimes diversity within a committee is not necessarily about any particular race or gender, it's making sure there is an intellectual diversity regarding perspectives on and approaches to the issue(s) at hand.





- ♦ If a committee is considering action that will affect a specific subset of people or group, that group should always have a representative voice on the committee.
- Committee membership and nominations for committee membership can help develop leadership capacity within units and for the university in general.
  - ♦ For example, for emerging leaders in your unit, think about nominations to campus committees that will enlarge their perspectives and information about the broader university, including budget, policy, strategic planning, and promotion and tenure matters.

## Much Rests on the Chair

- In any gathering of smart people holding strong opinions, having a level-headed, calm voice to direct the flow of discussion and maintain order is vital. The Chair of a committee carries responsibility for the committee's productivity. The Chair's responsibilities encompass:
  - ♦ preparing (or overseeing preparation of) an agenda
  - ♦ keeping the discussion task-focused and moving forward
  - ♦ encouraging participation by all members
  - ♦ allowing some tangential or seemingly off-topic discussion that might reveal an aspect or complication not envisioned by the original problem -- but not too much!
  - ♦ keeping the committee aware of what has been accomplished and what has still to be accomplished
  - ♦ managing the tone and "heat" of the discussion
  - ♦ timekeeping in meetings
  - ♦ records of discussions (some committees may have a designated staff member to keep the minutes of meetings for official records, as well as to help facilitate correspondence and scheduling.)
- The Chair should make sure to keep an open line of communication with the person who originally appointed the committee with updates on its progress.
- The time of committee members must be respected. Committee activities should be scheduled on a reasonable time table and with enough forewarning for advance planning.

## Be Aware of the Drawbacks

*There are a number of ways committees can become problematic.*

- If a committee chair dominates the discussion, that can distort and undermine the purpose. The temptation to cater to what "the boss" would like can be a powerful, even subconscious drive.
- Similarly, a weak chair leaves openings for a more vocal or imposing personality to dominate to the detriment of the appointment.
- Committee progress can grind to a halt from too much redundant discussion. This is commonly known as "paralysis by analysis." It is one of the duties of the chair to assure the conversations stay productive and relevant to the appointment.
- Don't appoint or empower a committee with a mission only to ignore their conclusions. There are few quicker ways to earn the ire of busy people asked to serve than to waste their time. Provide information and feedback if their conclusions or recommendations are rejected.
- While committees can democratize the process and share responsibility for difficult and complex decisions, they should not be used as scapegoats for unpopular choices. If a leader appoints a committee, he/she should be prepared to support them if they have done their work well and conscientiously.

