

# Developing Effective Councils & Committees: Toward Optimum Functionality

by Debra Jones

Councils and committees share leadership with volunteers and paid staff in developing and maintaining strong programs that are responsive to community needs and interests. An effective council or committee can help organizations:

- Set direction
- Network and provide public relations
- Make connections and mobilize community support and involvement
- Secure funding and other resources
- Plan and implement an overall program and its components
- Evaluate a program in relation to quality of service and community needs and interests
- Assist in determining the need for new programs and deleting existing programs
- Provide technical assistance and expertise

In order to fulfill the above tasks, council or committee members should have an understanding of the organization's mission, take active roles in planning, delivering or evaluating programs in meeting community needs and interests, and, most importantly, be willing to work together for the good of the organization even if they hold different viewpoints. Every council or committee member is responsible for making sure that all group members are treated with respect and that all voices are heard. This is more easily accomplished when everyone contributes to the health of the group. This fact sheet offers guidance in understanding the responsibilities the council and committee members have toward the success of the group.

## Do You Look Forward to the Meetings?

If not, you are probably not the only one. A fully functioning council or committee is one in which people are comfortable around one another and willing to share ideas and feedback. It's important to set a welcoming atmosphere during group meetings as well as during informal exchanges among group members between meetings. As people come together for meetings, it's natural to want some time to visit and connect before getting down to business, so build in this time and let it work for you. You may want to consider a few general guidelines as you bring groups together:

- Allow time for informal discussion prior to the meeting.
- Use activities that bring the group together while also providing information needed for the meeting.
- Meet only as often as necessary to accomplish agreed-upon goals. Monthly meetings may be a general guideline, but they are only that — a guideline. Use the judgment of the group to determine how often it is necessary to meet.
- Remember that silence is OK. Offering silence to the group invites people to think about what has been said and how they feel about it. Also realize that the continued silence of individuals may not indicate agreement; ask, and be sure all voices are given the opportunity to speak freely. Avoiding silence or not addressing prolonged silence may invite an eventual "parking lot meeting." These informal meetings of a few people in the parking lot after the meeting are generally an indicator that issues that needed to be addressed were not brought up for discussion. It is everyone's responsibility to understand that the group cannot deal with issues if they are not brought up for discussion.

The chairperson or facilitator plays a key role in maintaining smooth operation of the group. Take time to consider the best choice in filling this role rather than filling it with the first person who volunteers or, worse yet, with someone coerced by the group to serve because no one else steps up to the responsibility. If your group is experiencing the latter scenario, discuss with the group why this role is not appealing to members. As a general rule, when things are not functioning well, it's a reminder to revisit the purpose of the group, who needs to be at the table to accomplish the tasks at hand and whether the group has served its purpose and members can move on to other opportunities. It is all too common for groups to plod along in obvious dysfunction. Rather than perpetuate dysfunction to the detriment of the program, respect the membership by addressing the issue and its underlying causes. When filling the role of chairperson or facilitator, consider the candidate's ability to:

- Work with and listen to others
- Respect other opinions
- Trust the group to make a decision

- Understand and articulate the task of the council or committee
- Develop agendas in partnership with paid staff as appropriate
- Keep discussion flowing and the group on task
- Set a positive tone of the meeting
- Handle controversy
- Summarize viewpoints and paraphrase for understanding
- Oversee the group process for fairness and inclusiveness

### Rotating the Role of Chair or Facilitator

Some group members find it difficult to take on the role of chairperson. Rotating the position rather than having someone serve for a specified term gives everyone an opportunity to experience the role before determining if it is comfortable for them. Rotation provides a non-threatening way that group members can experience the role and become more sensitive to others in the role, which may lead to more democratic decisions. Rotation can be done alphabetically by last name or first name or by any system decided upon by the group. When rotating the role of chairman or facilitator, make sure the next person is aware of his or her leadership role for the next meeting.

### Observations: How Does Your Group Do What it Does?

Offering time for observations is an easy way for group members to experience what a meeting looks like from an outside perspective. As they watch the group dynamics, they will most likely identify behaviors that are not obvious when actively participating in discussions. When members sit outside of the group to observe, provide the following guidelines to help them assess the group dynamics:

#### Participation

- Who talks to whom?
- Who keeps the meeting moving and how?

#### Influence

- Who is listened to when they speak?
- Is anyone pushing others to a decision?
- Is anyone hampering discussion?
- Is anyone blocking decisions?
- Is anyone bringing up new issues before decisions are made?

- Is there enough information to make the decisions?
- Is the group taking one person's word for it?
- Is anyone making attempts to support the position of others?
  - How so?
  - How does the group respond to this?
- Is anyone sincerely trying to keep peace among the group members?
  - How so?
  - How does the group respond to this?
- How does the group get back or stay on track?
  - Who brings them back?
  - How does the group respond to this?
  - Based on your observations, you may be asking yourself what is NOT on the agenda that should be?
- What is a question or issue that someone would like to see on the agenda but is hesitant to suggest?

### Take Time to Process

Reflect on what you've observed and think about how to apply what you've learned to future activities. Respect group members by taking the time to share your observations with them, and engage everyone in being part of positive change.

Seeing a meeting scheduled on your calendar or receiving notice of an upcoming meeting should be something you look forward to, not something you dread. It is the responsibility of every council or committee member to ensure that meetings are time well spent.

To help keep the momentum going, establish a practice of reviewing activities/strategies about every two to three years. This helps keep the program fresh and relevant by giving new members an opportunity to become familiar with programs while continuing successful activities and retiring activities that are no longer needed.

### References

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