

## Facing Some Inconvenient Truths about Committees

by Patricia A Hudson, MPsSc

"As the association prepared for its summer conference...most committees were not doing anything...  
most committees reported little or no progress since the last conference."

*American Library Association*

Sound familiar? Before reading on, ask yourself...what "year" would you attribute to this quote?

**A**re committee members just too busy?  
We've been convinced – maybe from our own experiences or the counsel from others - that committees are a waste of time.

The most popular reason given for their failure is that members are too busy.....

Too busy to prepare for meetings.

Too busy to pay attention at meetings.

Too busy to follow-up afterwards.

How valid is such a notion? You may have chuckled when you read the quote above as it might just have been yours. Well, Melville Dewey (*Dewey Decimal System creator*) was the author. And he said it in **1879!** A time when things were different. When people had more time and volunteers were more committed to their associations. Really?

Does this quote prove that committees filled with well-intentioned volunteers have become irrelevant? Or obsolete? Many have been quick to suggest these working groups be marginalized, reshaped, or eliminated. In fact, many of us have spent the past several decades reducing the number of standing committees in our organizations. We've renamed them, changed their focus, and redefined their responsibilities. Have these adaptations made a difference?

Many options have been and continue to be suggested, tried, and abandoned. The search for the 'holy grail' of committee management continues. One of the most recent and popular options suggests that committee meetings would be improved if staff led meetings rather than volunteers. This might be an attractive option for the staff tasked to get things done. But those who have observed such actions have seen its unanticipated consequences: a decline in member engagement or an increase in member apathy...take your pick.

Neither seems acceptable as outcomes.

So what are the alternatives?

### Establishing Basic Principles for Committee Effectiveness

Before conducting any more research or opening another self-help book, consider taking a more strategic look at these *organized clusters of human talent*. Enough evidence exists to suggest that *effective* committees serve a valuable and essential role in the governance process. The breadth of information, advice and tools available also suggest they can be productive and meaningful. The titles imposed upon these groups (working group, task force, etc.) are, for the most part, a semantic attempt to reshape the essential unit.

So regardless of their size, name, role, and duration, the fact remains that a committee is a group of elected or appointed individuals who have made a "commitment to pursue an assigned task or perform a function."

The larger issue may indeed be whether or not we believe members should be involved in the governance of their own organization. If we believe members must be engaged, attention needs to shift from the fact that "committees don't work" to why they succeed or fail. And most certainly you know some that have been successful. The key is to understand a few basic principles.

Committee effectiveness is predicated upon ...

- competent committee management and productive meeting management (yes, they are different).
- a recognition that associations are a talent pool; that everyone involved in the process has a desire and the potential to succeed but often lacks the skills or experience necessary to do so.

- attitudes and an organizational culture that believes in empowering those involved to become adept in their role.

These principles have a direct correlation to the kind of committees involved in your governance process.

### **Effective Committee Management vs Productive Meeting Management**

*Effective committee management* is the process followed to support a committee (the chair and members) to achieve its goals or assignments within a specified time frame. It includes functions like:

- the scope of the committee's responsibilities (related to the association's annual/strategic plan);
- the interface (ongoing communication and reports) between the committee and the board; the establishment of a productive working relationship between the chair, committee members and staff;
- the assessment of committee members' strengths and weaknesses (guiding the development of materials for review/action); the development and oversight of an annual work plan supporting goal fulfillment;
- the planning and execution of meetings;
- and more.

*Productive meeting management* is the process involved in planning and executing a successful meeting. It includes the actions necessary to ensure that those involved have the information within a carefully designed structure to discuss, debate, deliberate and decide on specific actions to ensure continued progress toward its goals/tasks.

Productive meeting management is a part of effective committee management. But not vice versa.

If this is so, can we continue to say that committees don't work?

### **It's not just about effective meetings...**

An *inconvenient truth* is that we tend to evaluate committees solely on the meetings that are run and not on its management. We approach committee meetings as 'independent events' rather than a 'series of events' designed to achieve specific goals or assigned tasks.

Successful committee managers develop annual workplans that:

- define the steps necessary to achieve the goals/tasks;
- identify the number of meetings available/necessary to achieve the goals/tasks;
- determine the decisions that must be made at meetings;
- identify the information that necessary to support productive discussions;
- establish the work required between meetings to ensure continued progress; and
- outline steps for scheduling/organizing meetings.

These steps are often followed by staff responsible for committees that plan a conference or major event. But this approach is not often taken for other committees that have tasks or assignments that lack the same time breadth or time sensitivity.

### **Empower Committee Members to Become Responsible Meeting Participants**

Another *inconvenient truth* is not that committees don't work; but that far too often it is because meetings are run poorly. It's not simply the fault of the current chair. The reasons for this are many:

- agenda has no meaningful action;
- materials needed to make decisions are not provided;
- raw data is often not analyzed sufficiently to support member interpretation;
- meeting is not facilitated well;
- staff too aggressive or passive;
- staff unaware how best to support a volunteer chair;
- and so on.

No one person – not volunteer or staff – is guaranteed of being a good meeting facilitator. This would suggest that shifting such responsibility from volunteer to staff would not resolve the perceived problem. The effort instead should be on empowering all involved to become responsible meeting participants.

Much can be done to improve the way meetings are run – and much exists in the literature – print and digital – to achieve that end.

### Talent Pool

A very popular notion exists – often among staff – that committees would function effectively if we just got the *'right members with the appropriate leadership skills.'* But those who currently possess such leadership skills most-likely honed them somewhere else. It would be a good bet that they did so from their participation in another committee! Productive committees provide real-time on-site training.

Theda Skocpol, a noted Harvard scholar, demonstrated in her research that voluntary organizations – more specifically their committee and board meetings - have historically trained volunteers in these essential skills. They've provided mentored 'on the job' training. Reducing or eliminating these opportunities has diminished the ability for associations to achieve this end and has generated unanticipated and unwelcome consequences.

An ***inconvenient truth*** is that few of us are born with the skills necessary to be an effective leader. Most of us possess the potential and have the willingness to learn. Those respected for their expertise often attribute getting such skills from 'real-time' committee experience and the generous support from colleagues/staff.

Here's an example of 'real-time' committee experience and learning:

A Florida association executive felt her entrepreneurially-focused volunteer leaders would be more effective if they learned how to think strategically. Rather than conduct a training session (which they would balk at attending), she introduced an emerging issue (that had direct impact on their businesses) at the start of every meeting. She offered them a set of "strategic" questions to guide the 30-minute discussion. After several meetings, she noticed those same strategic questions emerged at critical times throughout the meeting.

Brilliant move on her part!

### Attitudes and Culture

We too easily forget that associations were founded by members who voluntarily contributed time and talent to build their organizations to the point where eventually they employed staff. Few companies, institutions, and even voluntary organizations operate at high performance. But at the heart of every successful association are prevailing attitudes and a

culture that everyone matters and everyone must participate together to accomplish the goals.

Associations are distinctive from other nonprofit and for-profit organizations in their design and operation. Even scholars agree. When changes undermine their very essence, these organizations and all involved are affected. The consequences may not be initially noticed, but ultimately, the impact is felt. Unfortunately, the reason given for the problem is not always accurate. And thus the strategy for its resolution is somewhat misdirected.

An ***inconvenient truth*** is that somehow we have convinced ourselves that members are no longer interested in nor willing to be part of our committees. Not true. Surveys support the fact that members of all generations want to contribute in ways that are meaningful and productive. Their complaint is that *meetings too often deal with superficial issues, lacking any real opportunity to make a difference.*

From recent experiences with a few committees, I have to agree. Too many committees have become focused on perfunctory rather than strategic issues. The very management of the committee and the meetings held surrounding it drives discussion to operational rather than policy issues. It gives the impression that these positions are designed to give members a chance for involvement but lacks the opportunity for them to make meaningful contributions of their expertise and talent. It leaves one questioning the value of the experience and the time committed.

Rather than continuing to reduce and eliminate committees, what if we took an honest look at how we manage committees and run meetings?

### Assessing Your Association's Readiness for Effective Committee Management

Depending on your leadership calendar, you may be just launching your first meetings. Or you might be resuming meetings for the second half of year. In any event, use the following questions to assess your association's readiness regarding managing committees and running their meetings:

1. Does everyone understand the difference between managing a committee and running a meeting?
2. Is everyone proficient in committee management – i.e. charting the steps and decisions a committee needs to make to achieve its goals over the course of the year?

3. Is the committee management plan of action reviewed routinely and adjusted as needed to ensure progress?
4. Is everyone proficient in the techniques of meeting facilitation?
5. Does everyone know the techniques in developing an agenda that shapes discussion, moves toward decision-making, and manages time?
6. Is everyone expected to conduct a preliminary discussion with their volunteer counterpart focused on establishing a *productive working relationship*? (see sample of guidelines at: <http://www.melosinstitute.org>)
7. Does everyone know how to assess the readiness of their volunteer counterpart? And then generate an agreement in how they can be of support?
8. Are expectations to develop productive working relationships with volunteers and other staff incorporated into staff performance measures? Are they given serious attention?
9. Are all assignments/tasks tied to your association's strategic/annual plan?
10. Do volunteers and staff clearly understand their roles and responsibilities? Is there sufficient reference material or orientation provided?

**Reinforce the Power of Collective Action....  
One Committee at a Time**

Your members represent a vast talent pool. And, each has connections into a professional network that would benefit your organization. By creating opportunities for members to become actively engaged in their organization's governance, you not only enhance your ability to make such connections, you also reinforce the power of collective action...one committee at a time.

Contact the Melos Institute ([info@melosinstitute.org](mailto:info@melosinstitute.org) or 650.355.4094) if you're looking for additional examples, ideas or other tools to support your efforts.

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