

Keys to Effective Committees

Committees are the backbone of the organization. They provide the careful study and analysis that allow the bigger group to make correct decisions. Effective committees don't just happen -- they are a combination of a good purpose, a good leader, and good committee members.

Purpose

Ask yourself, what is the committee's role? Does it have a record of achievement? The establishment of clear, realistic goals will make your priorities known. This also gives members a clear sense of what they will be expected to contribute to the committee.

Leadership

Carefully plan your agendas and meeting timetables to prevent last-minute changes. Give your members time to prepare for the meeting by distributing agendas in advance. Try not to dominate committee discussions. As a leader, you should help the committee maintain a focus while allowing members to express themselves even if their views are contrary to your own. Never permit name calling or hostile discussions.

You can regain control of rambling discussions by calling on a different member for their opinion on the agenda item or by suggesting that they postpone their ideas until later. Briefly summarizing the committee's ideas on a topic can also bring closure to an agenda item discussion.

Membership

An optimal size for a committee is five to seven members. Members should be receptive to new ideas and other people's opinions. Work is accomplished in a committee when members understand their task and are able to focus on it creatively.

Seating arrangements for committees are important. Round or square tables that offer members a view of one another, encourage open discussion, and trust. Try to hold meetings in a central consistent location, and make sure all members are notified of the time and place well in advance of the meeting.

When you assign tasks, set deadlines. Ask members to submit their information or completed task before the next meeting so you have a chance to prepare your feedback and follow-up suggestions.

Close committee meetings by summarizing major points and assignment deadlines. Minutes are a good way to inform members of deadlines and responsibilities, and these should be distributed within ten days of the meeting. You may want to make additional follow-up phone calls one week prior to the deadline to see if unanswered questions are preventing the completion of the task. Adhering to established deadlines will help members take you more seriously.

Remember that recognition can go a long way in encouraging member loyalty and commitment. Acknowledge the committee's work through notes to both the workers and to the general organization. Appreciation will attract more people to your committees in the future.

Finally, remember to report regularly to the general organization. Repeating a summary of your committee's work will help to decrease controversy about your decisions and to increase support for committee activities. If you need help with an activity, you should warn the bigger group as soon as possible.