

The Case Against Committees

BY LYNDON G. FURST

IT'S A FAMILIAR SCENE. Someone proposes a new idea to improve school operation, generating impassioned discussion. The possibility of change produces both enthusiasm and panic. Finally, someone states the obvious, "We don't have enough information to make an intelligent decision. We're getting nowhere with this endless debate. Why don't we have a committee look into this and come back

with a recommendation?"

Everyone agrees, and the debate turns to the membership of the committee—which ideally must include a young person, a teacher, one of the pastors, equal representation of men and women, and at least one minority. This committee of 11 or more people begins to meet on a regular basis.

Progress is virtually nil as the members continue to debate the same issue as the large group that appointed them.

After several weeks of tireless work, they submit a report—a document full of compromises that looks very little like the original idea. By now, the initial suggestion is forgotten and enthusiasm has waned. The leader of the group thanks the committee for its hard work and schedules the report for a future meeting agenda. There it is discussed once or twice more and eventually forgotten. No one ever reads the full committee report.

The foregoing illustrates one of the

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ways that committees interfere with the flow of effective work in modern organizations. They tend to slow progress, strangle innovation, promote mediocrity, and discourage initiative. Assigned a specific task, committees find it difficult to stay focused. Since they usually are made up of people representing several smaller constituencies within the larger organization, each member tends to focus on the special interests of his or her subgroup rather than the needs of the whole organization.

Designed by Committee

One sage (for whom I have lost the documentation) offered an interesting description of this phenomenon: "People on committees tend to agree on courses of action which individually they know to be stupid." Despite the members' good intentions, making progress within the structure of competing interests requires a great deal of compromise. This, at times results in strange decisions. "A camel is a horse designed by a committee" is a well-known description of the problem.

Non-profit organizations are particularly vulnerable to the insidious tentacles of the committee process. They want to be democratic and to allow input from all constituencies. Thus, their committees are chosen with inclusiveness in mind, and give a look of openness to the decision-making process. This penchant for satisfying the narrow interests of every subgroup is a major reason why churches, schools, clubs, and other such organizations are known for their inability to make quick decisions—or even ones that are in their own best interest.

Leaders of such organizations who

wish to preserve a high level of control while maintaining an appearance of democracy frequently use committees to stifle ideas from underlings. Any new proposal the leader opposes can be assigned to a committee. There it gets lost in the process, becomes so distorted it can't be recognized, or takes so long to reappear that all interest has been lost. Committees make it possible for an autocratic leader to maintain the look of participatory management while continuing dictatorial control.

Certain types of decision-making do need to be assigned to committees. When creating policies that will affect a variety of cultures or people groups, organizations must seek input from those constituencies. Failing to involve a wide variety of people in such decision-making almost guarantees that the unrepresented groups will feel left out, and may try to ignore or sabotage the policy when it is applied. Minorities will allege that the dominant group is abusing its power. Unexpected consequences may undermine the policy's effectiveness if a variety of viewpoints and circumstances were not taken into consideration when the policy was made.

But there is a difference between *making* policy and *implementing* policy. Too often, things bog down when organizations try to use the same process for administrative action as they use for policy-making. Committees tend to slow things down, while teams get things done.

Using Small Groups to Get Things Done

So, if committees are an inefficient way of getting things done, how can organizations get work done on issues that are impractical for the large group to tackle? Many have shifted to assigning specific tasks to small teams. Unlike committees, teams have members chosen for a special skill rather than the interest group they represent. For example, a team assigned to deal with a fiscal emergency would need members with certain financial skills. It might not include a single senior citizen, a youth, or even a male. The members are picked to deal with a specific problem, not to protect the interests of

subgroups within the organization.

Organizing a Team

One effective way to organize a team is to choose the leader first. He or she is then held accountable for the whole project and picks people with suitable skills to get the job done.

Every task in an organization has a political component, and team leaders must be aware of this fact. However, rather than choosing team members for political reasons, it might be more effective to include a communication specialist on the team. He or she can maintain two-way communication between the team and the political constituencies of the organization.

For a team to be effective, members must be willing to be held accountable for their individual contributions to its work. They also must discipline one another to keep the work moving and stay focused on the problem at hand. When members get off track, it is up to the rest of the team to nudge them back on. The team thus collectively ensures that every member gets his or her work done efficiently and on time.

When choosing team leaders, select people with a global view of the issue at hand, as well as knowledge about its individual parts. People who have a highly developed sense of detail seldom make good team leaders. When studying financial problems, an accountant might be a good person to have on the team, but not necessarily as leader. The leader must be able to divide the problem into small parts, choose people with the needed skills who can work together with a minimum of friction, make critical assignments, keep the team focused on the task, and pull all the parts together to complete the project.

When the project is finished, the group disbands. Seldom is a "standing" team needed. In many organizations, employees are evaluated on how well they contribute to a team. If they don't work well with others, complete their part of the project, or put aside personal interests for the good of the team, they are not asked to serve again.

To be useful to a team, one must have

a specific skill related to the problem at hand. Every member should have at least one area in which he or she is highly competent. In addition, general teamwork skills are very useful, such as (1) willingness to accept a diversity of ideas, (2) the ability to stay focused on an individual task, and (3) the willingness to accept discipline from the group for not meeting team goals, and (4) a commitment to call other team members to account when they get off track.

While chosen for their expertise and expected to act, members of action teams also need to be sensitive about the potential effects of their work. They must seek input from their various constituencies, be willing to answer questions and change their recommendations when presented with new information, and not use their expertise as an excuse to behave arrogantly.

Conclusion

Are there ever times when a commit-

tee is appropriate? Definitely, yes. When change is happening too rapidly, a committee functions well to slow things down to a manageable pace. Whenever broad political support is necessary, committees are essential. In fact, in most organizations, change and problem-solving both have political elements that frequently call for a committee. However, to actually get the work done, the committee may have to ask a team to handle the technical aspects of the job. For example, if a school needs a new public-address system, a committee may decide what kind of system, how much it should cost, and how it will be used. These are political decisions. However, the installation of the system should be done by a team of experts (electricians and sound engineers) who may not represent every subgroup within the school.

Largely doing away with committees may seem like a radical idea. In some cases, it will be politically necessary to rely on the committee process. Tradition

dies hard in most organizations. Yet committees often interfere with progress. Successful administrators who seek to overcome institutional inertia and get things done will want to limit decision-making by committee. ☞

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