

Reel in the Committees

(Includes 11 hyperlinks to committee resources.)

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Committees are a good way to supplement the work of the board and staff. They help develop future leaders.

Though, there are reasons committees can be a hindrance instead of an asset. Reel them in to maintain efficiency and maximize value.

Purpose – A committee should have a narrowly defined statement of purpose to frame its work. This helps avoid mission creep. Brief, two or three sentence [Purpose Statements](#) should be set, often documented in a [Policy Manual](#).

Alignment – Committees should be aligned with the organization’s strategic plan. For example, a goal of “Advocacy” is likely to have a 1) government affairs committee and a 2) political action committee, to advance the goal.

After the board’s planning retreat, check that each goal has committee support. Goals without committee alignment are often left to the efforts of staff. When a committee makes a recommendation, it is fair to ask, “How does this effort advance our strategic plan?”

Authority – Committees have no authority to speak for or expend funds for the organization, unless explicitly stated. They get their authority from the board of directors and bylaws.

The principle of [Apparent Authority](#) would indicate that an organization can be held liable for the actions and statements by a committee. To reign in any misdeeds, all committee communications should go through staff.

Liaisons – Board and staff members may serve as liaisons to committees. A [Staff Liaison](#) functions as a resource to the committee chair; staff are not secretaries for a committee. A [Board Liaison](#) ensures the committee is on task, providing a channel of communication between board and committee.

Orientation – Bring together committee chairs and vice chairs for an annual orientation. Provide guidance in planning meetings, policies, and meeting ground rules, and how to make recommendations. An 18-page guide for [Committee Orientation](#) is available.

Economics – While committees are meant to be an asset, some can be a liability by wasting time or money. Many committees ask for a budget but give little thought



to how they can generate revenue through new programs, sponsorships, increased membership, etc.

Providing each committee with an operating budget is not the best practice. They may feel pressed to spend the funds by year end. If a committee needs funds, make it part of a request that justifies how the funds will advance the organization's mission and strategic plan.

Respect – Committees and meetings should be guided by respect, diversity, and transparency. The time and input of volunteers should be honored. Similarly, recognize that staff assigned to the committee provide information and resources, they are not secretaries. Their committee time is above and beyond their workload. Committees should not invent new activities to justify their existence.

Meetings - The fastest way to repel a member is to invite them to a meeting that wastes their time. For instance, a meeting that starts late has no agenda, nor any significant outcomes.

Orchestrate carefully planned meetings with purpose, resources, and a well-crafted agenda. Chairs should be versed in [Rules of Order](#) and set principled [Meeting Ground Rules](#). The IRS queries if committees with authority keep minutes.

Recommendations – Most [Recommendations](#) must be approved by the board, especially new programs, events, and budgeting. The board should ask the committee to describe how their recommendation advances the mission and which goals in the strategic plan. Further, they should be asked if the recommendation has an economic impact.

Sunset – Committees without alignment to the strategic plan goals, or that are not producing results, may be [Sunset](#). Do it delicately so as not to hurt relations with volunteers who have served. Find new positions for those wanting to continue [Volunteering](#).

Succession – Committees should have term limits, encouraging new people and ideas in the group. For a smooth transition, be sure the current committee keeps notes that can be passed along to next year's committee leadership. It starts by reading the year of [Committee Minutes](#).

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Note: The hyperlinks lead to resources for effective committees. The website www.nonprofitcenter.com has free board and committee resources.