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COMMITTEES

How to Select and Use Them

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COMMITTEES

How to Select and Use Them

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The Kinds of Committees

A committee is a group of people appointed from a larger group to act upon a particular matter. While there may be many kinds of committees, most of them can be divided into 3 categories according to how they function:

- (1) Those expected to set up their own goals or procedures and to carry their task to completion within the committee membership;
- (2) those expected to stimulate action on the part of membership of the parent body* in carrying out goals chosen by the organization as a whole; and
- (3) those expected to stimulate action on the part of membership of the parent body* in carrying out goals chosen by the committee.

Examples of committees of the first type are: (1) a committee that has been instructed to draw up a constitution for the organization of which it is a part; (2) a committee appointed to put on an exhibit at a county fair; (3) a committee that is to plan a program for a particular occasion.

Committees of the second type may include: (1) a committee set up to raise a special fund; (2) a community club farm improvement or home improvement committee, and (3) a home demonstration club work project committee.

**The parent body is that group of people which the committee is supposed to represent. This need not be a formal organization. A home agent may set up a county home economics committee to represent the women of the county; these latter would then be considered the parent body.*

Many county-wide agricultural commodity committees fall into the third class. So also do community improvement committees in communities which are too large for direct participation of all members in organizational activities.

The major difference between the last 2 types of committees is primarily the size of parent organizations. If this organization is small enough for the entire membership to select its goals, committees of the second type should be set up to accelerate their accomplishment. In such cases, it is a serious mistake to let the committee pick the goals, because they become committee goals and not those of the entire organization. However, when the committee represents a large and widely scattered group of people, such as all the farmers of a given county, it functions as a group of the third type. It must first set up the goals which it hopes the people in the county will accomplish.

Qualifications of Committee Members

Know-how

Individuals chosen for membership in any of these 3 types of committees should be recognized by their fellows as having the kind of know-how which the committee's task requires. Recognition for having know-how may be more important than the quality of the know-how itself, particularly if the committee's task is to stimulate others to act. Having recognition implies the individual has a following that will more readily accept the committee's recommendations. If each member of the committee has such recognition and following, the chances are good that members of the parent group will readily carry out goals set by the committee. If committee members lack this recognition and therefore have no following, they will have little success in accomplishing what they have set out to do.

Willingness to Change

In most cases, a committee, regardless of its stated purpose, is concerned primarily with the task of bringing about change in people's attitudes or behavior. In this respect committee members should be pace-setters. Either they have already made the desired changes themselves, or they have shown a willingness to make such changes as the thinking of the committee may dictate.

A farmer who hasn't adopted a new agricultural practice in 20 years would, from this point of view, be an unwise choice

for a committee to consider county or community farm goals. He will be slow to accept recommended changes and less likely to carry them out on his own farm.



If committee membership is relatively large, a few individuals may be included in it who have not shown a willingness to change, but are desired for other reasons. They may represent geographical areas or status groups which do not contain individuals with this desirable qualification. Frequently, group motivating forces within the committee may bring about changes in the attitudes of such hesitant members and, through them, affect others in the areas or groups they represent. Adding such persons to the committee should not be attempted, however, unless the majority of committee members can be relied on to advocate change.

Of the People

The final qualification of committee members should be that, as a group, they represent the total membership of the parent organization. They should represent the people from different geographical areas if this is important in the organization's activities, as it would be, for example, with a county agricultural board; they should also represent the different status groups found in the organization, not just the well-to-do, or the better educated; and in organizations that include

people of both sexes and of all ages, the committee membership should be drawn from a cross-section of the different age and sex groups.

When young people show a lack of interest in the organization's activities, it may be they are not adequately represented on the action committees. County agricultural boards may make little headway in changing the agricultural practices of the lower-income farmers, or of farmers in a particular neighborhood, if the board's action committees are made up exclusively of the farmers from the more progressive farm neighborhoods in the county.

In choosing members of a committee, these things should be kept in mind: (1) they should have recognition for having know-how in the area of activity to which the committee expects to devote its attention; (2) they should be individuals who have given evidence of a willingness to change by their past acceptance of new practices and ideas; and (3) the committee membership should be representative of the membership of the parent organization.

In many cases committee members are potential rather than recognized leaders. Membership on a committee is often the first step toward their becoming bona fide leaders. If members have the qualifications listed above, they have the basic ingredients for leadership; the committee assignment may provide the situation which will help develop them into full-fledged leaders.

Other so-called leadership characteristics such as personality, initiative, and the like often develop from the situation provided by the committee assignment. In any case they may make the difference between good and mediocre committee members, but at the start are not to be considered essential to membership.

Who Chooses Committee Members

Since there are many kinds of committees, it is impossible to set a pattern that will apply equally well to all in the matter of how they are chosen. Generally, however, 3 things should be kept in mind. First, a number of people should be consulted to make sure that the individuals chosen have the 3 qualifications listed above. For example, people living in different

parts of a county should be questioned as to the persons best suited to represent them. This may be done informally even better than through group action, since formal group choices often result in the selection of status leaders rather than ones with the proper know-how.



Second, if a committee chairman is appointed at the start by the parent organization, he should have some voice in selecting those who are to work with him.

And, third, the more status the committee has in its own eyes, the more thoroughly it is apt to do its job. Appointment or choice by one person seldom provides as much status in this sense as appointment by a group, agency, or organization. So, regardless of who does the actual choosing, some formal organization should ratify the choice in order to give the committee the status it needs.

The Committee Chairman and His Job

In an organization in which the members are fairly well acquainted with each other, a committee may be appointed with instructions to choose its own chairman. In this way the group will be encouraged to operate democratically from the start.

Where the committee is drawn from different geographical areas and status groups and may be made up of individuals who have only a vague idea who their fellow members are, considerable merit rests in having the chairman appointed ahead of time by the parent organization. This will ensure greater likelihood that the chairman will understand what the committee's assignment is, and that he will have the ability to conduct the committee sessions.

Regardless of the manner in which the chairman is chosen, his job is to see that the committee sessions are conducted democratically, and that all members are given an opportunity to maximize their participation in the committee's activities.



The chairman should not try to direct the committee to carry out his own preconceived notions of what it ought to do. Whatever contributions he may have to offer, he must offer only as another committee member, not as the chairman. His goal should be not to see that the committee does what he believes is right, but to ensure that members feel whatever they do is what they as a group conceive to be the right thing. This is essential if the committee is to carry its goals to completion.

If the chairman has any policing activities, they are to see that the committee sticks to its assigned task and that no one

prevents others from participating democratically in the discussions either by bullying or monopolizing the discussion. If the chairman feels that he is not competent to do this part of his job well, he may deputize someone that he knows can do it to "see that we stick to the subject" or "see that no one monopolizes the discussion."

The chairman should feel free to participate in the discussion whenever he has a genuine contribution to make. He should remember, however, that the more he talks "just to keep the ball rolling," the more he will keep others from talking or from thinking. Silence is often golden in a committee meeting.

Democratic Versus Do-nothing Leadership

In attempting to be what they consider democratic leaders should be, many chairmen conduct committee meetings in a laissez faire or do-nothing manner. There is a very real difference between democratic leadership and this do-nothing type. In fact, the phrase "do-nothing leadership" emphasizes its absurdity.

A democratic leader is at all times aware of the individuals on his committee. their needs, skills, and inter-personal re-



lationships. He is motivated by a desire to help the group achieve what it wants, never failing to remember that he is an integral part of the group. His determination to achieve group cohesion and group goals may slow down the decision-making process, but greatly enhances the group's chances for accomplishing its goals.

By contrast, the do-nothing leader tends to subordinate recognition of personal qualities of his committee members to a superficial desire to get along with them with a minimum of effort. This attitude may cause some members to feel rejected, but in any case it leads to a free-for-all situation in which each member tends to go off on his own tangent. As a consequence, the group never fully matures, comes to no concrete decision, and accomplishes nothing.

The Role of the Agency Representative in Committee Activities

Agricultural Extension agents, Soil Conservation Service representatives, and other professional workers often depend on committees to help them carry out their duties in a given area.

In-so-far as possible they should avoid becoming committee officers such as chairmen, secretaries, or treasurers, except where regulations require that they be. Their job in relation to the committee's activities is three-fold:

(1) In committee sessions the agency representative should help by providing know-how which is not otherwise available. He should recognize, however, that to the extent he monopolizes the role of expert, he will prevent potential leaders from developing and will rob others of the recognition that is essential to their doing a good job.

(2) Behind the scenes, the agency representative should work with selected committee members. He should help them see the importance of arriving at committee decisions democratically, guide them in the proper use of group techniques, and help them appreciate the relation of group motivation to the accomplishment of goals.

In carrying out this function he must be extremely careful not to make the committee chairman or other members feel

dependent upon him for advice or assistance. He should never thrust his relationship on these leaders in the committee sessions.

If the agency representative finds himself playing the role of "manipulator" of the committee, he is doing his job poorly. He should, instead, be conscious of training leaders to become increasingly independent of him. The more this is true, the more pride he can take in his efforts.

(3) In his relationships with the committee members, the agency representative should study each individual to uncover



skills, attitudes, or relationships which may be utilized to further purposes of the committee. He will encourage creation of situations where these individuals will have an opportunity to utilize their skills in advancing the work of the committee. In doing this part of his job effectively, the agency representative will be developing leaders, which is the most important achievement of any organization or agency in a democracy.

Steps in Decision Making

In carrying out the work of any committee, individual committee members may be so engrossed in their own definition

of the problem, or so convinced of the validity of their own preconceived solution, that they may lose contact with the rest of the members and thwart fulfillment of the committee's purpose.

To prevent this, a committee chairman may find it worthwhile to guide his committee through a number of steps in their thinking. How fully each step is explored will depend on the gravity of the problem involved; in some cases, each step may require only a matter of minutes, while in others a whole committee session may be required. These steps are:

(1) Define the problem. All members should be in agreement as to what the problem is before the committee moves ahead.

(2) Uncover essential information related to the problem. In some cases, days or weeks of individual effort may be required to obtain pertinent facts which bear upon the problem. But until the committee knows the extent to which the problem applies in the local area, its time may be wasted.

(3) Formulate alternative solutions to the problem. With each solution should be listed the local resources which are available for carrying it out and the conditions required for applying it.

(4) Weigh the alternative solutions in terms of:

- a. the consequences to which each could be expected to lead;
- b. the demands they would make upon the committee members;
- c. the demands they would make upon the members of the parent body; and
- d. the likelihood of these demands being met.

(5) Achieve consensus on the solution best suited to the time, place, and situation.

(6) Set up a goal towards which the committee will work in carrying out the chosen solution.

(7) Organize committee members to carry out the chosen solution.

(8) Plan a program whereby the accomplishment of the committee's goal can be evaluated at a later date. This eval-

uation should be in terms not of what the committee members do, but how well their goal has been accomplished.

Committee Goals and Objectives

One reason many committees fail in accomplishing their purpose is that they settle too readily for intangible or too generalized goals. For example, a community club committee which sets as its goal "to improve the spiritual life of the community" may feel a sense of virtue for having such a respectable-sounding objective, but it will have little to show for its efforts at the end of the year.

The best procedure for insuring realizable goals is to insist upon accompanying every goal that is set up with a measure whereby its accomplishment can be judged. If no such measure can be agreed upon, the goal is probably too intangible and should be replaced by another.

Part of the difficulty may be the failure to distinguish between goals and objectives.

For our purposes, an objective can be said to be the direction in which we wish to move. A goal marks the distance in that direction that we intend to travel in a given length of time. For example, a community may set as its objective the improvement of its farms. To aid in accomplishing this objective, the farmers in the community have set for themselves as one of several goals the seeding of an average of 5 acres of improved pasture per farm.

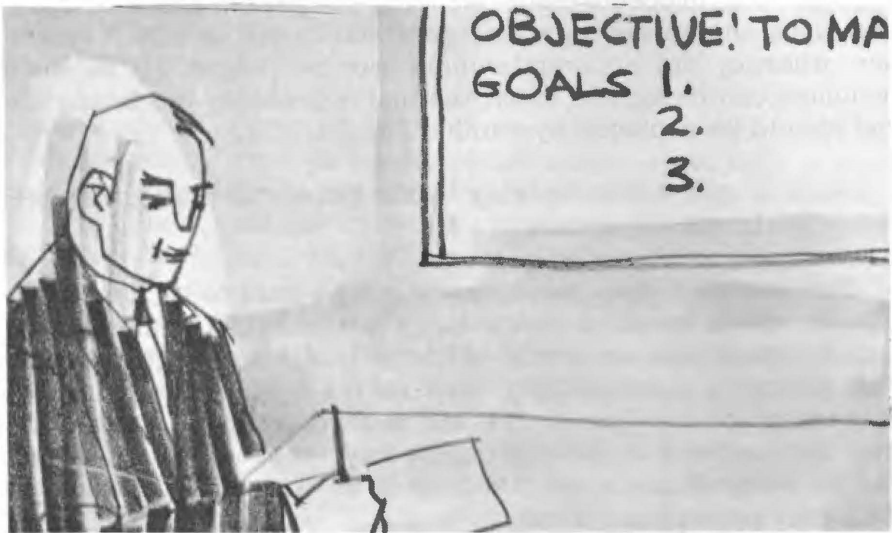
The objective may be the same for many years, while the goals can change from year to year as new developments in farming, as well as the unmet needs of the community, call for new lines of improvement.

Note that the farm goal given in the illustration above is one whose accomplishment can be readily measured. It will be easy to determine whether or not the farmers have seeded on the average of 5 acres of new pasture during the year.

The Physical Setting for Committee Meetings

To encourage the fullest participation of committee membership at all stages in this decision-making process, the committee meeting should be held under these conditions:

The group should be seated in a circle, preferably around a table. Ideally, the seating should be such that no distinction can be assumed between one member and another. To better crystallize group thinking, a blackboard may be used and some member of the group designated to list such points as the committee may want to keep before it. If such a blackboard is used, a break will need to be made in the circle of seats, so that no one has his back to the blackboard. The committee meeting should be held in a room where the physical comfort of members can be reasonably assured. Proper ventilation is especially important, particularly if some members of the group smoke. To help individuals formulate their ideas, paper and pencil should be available to all



Conclusion

In many cases, committee chairmen or others responsible for setting up meetings will feel that their assignment is simple and unimportant. They may feel it is unnecessary to provide a desirable physical setting for the meeting, or to follow any set procedure for achieving its purpose. Occasionally this may be true. But the chances are good that the person who takes his assignment seriously makes the proper preparations for holding the committee meeting. By holding his group to the logical sequence of steps in the decision-making process, he will come up with a more commendable committee achievement than if he had not done so. His success depends largely on the extent to which he carries out his purpose without making the committee members aware of what he is doing.



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