

“Imposing limits on committee chairs is an excellent way to give people rough the leadership of your association.”



DON'T SETTLE FOR MAKE-WORK. THESE STEPS CAN HELP ENSURE YOUR COMMITTEES ARE ENGAGED AND RELEVANT. **By Eileen Morgan Johnson**

Committees play a key role in the governance of an association, and boards often do their real work at the committee level. Committees allow members who are not on the board to demonstrate their leadership ability. But committees can be a drain on the association's resources, both human and financial. Too many committee meetings results in meeting fatigue.

To address the problem, here are five rules for committees.

1 Not every committee has a right to exist forever. There are several ways to pare down committees. “Zero based” and “sunsetting” are particularly effective methods. In a

zero-based committee system, the association starts fresh each year with only those committees required by its bylaws. The board determines the association's programmatic, operational, and governance needs and forms the necessary committees.

Sunsetting is slightly different: Each committee has a specified duration and ceases to exist on a specific date unless the board acts to extend it. This can be effective for associations that want change but are reluctant to make the hard decisions.

2 A committee must have real work and goals. A committee charter alone isn't enough. The board should give each committee a

specific charge, either at the start of each year or upon the committee's formation. The committee's charge identifies particular issues that the committee will focus on and the actions it is expected to take. Such actions can include:

- Studying an issue and reporting back to the board
- Recommending board action
- Monitoring activities such as conflicts of interest or finances
- Developing new programs, fundraising strategies, or membership activities, usually in conjunction with staff and/or members
- Handling specific tasks such as nominations or bylaws review.

Committees with a specific charge will be more focused, energized, and more likely to deliver useful results.

3 Even standing committees can be changed. You would probably not amend the association's bylaws just to change the standing committees. But a review of the standing committees should be part of a regular bylaws review, which should occur at least every two years.

4 Don't create a committee when a task force or study group will do. Task forces and study groups can be an informal, time-limited way to accomplish the same work as a committee. They are typically formed to tackle a particular problem or issue and report back to the board. Once the report is delivered, the group is disbanded.

5 Rotate chairs. Imposing term limits on committee chairs is an excellent way to move people through the leadership of your association. It also moves the focus from the individual to the committee as a whole, making it easier to dissolve committees that are no longer useful.

By following these rules, any association can streamline its committee structure and make committee service a pleasure for its members.



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