Helping Committees Avoid Trouble

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If you are a member of a community or county committee, you realize when it is in trouble. Members begin to miss meetings. They seem to lack enthusiasm during discussions of committee activities. Volunteers grow scarce for work on projects. There are misunderstandings about the goals of the committee.

Other signs suggest that, even if the committee is not having major problems now, it may well have difficulties in the near future. One tip-off is that the committee's decisions seem to be influenced more by the ideas of people less knowledgeable on the subject than by those better informed about it. A second signal is that there are especially great differences from one meeting to the next in the quality of the committee's performance. The committee's output seems to be on a "roller coaster." That is, sometimes they approach a problem very efficiently and come up with workable decisions. At other times they seem very disorganized and have difficulty working together on a problem. A third indication is that those people who are well informed on a topic are reluctant to lead the discussion of it, or their recommendations are not really heeded by the rest of the committee.

Whether you are a committee member or a chairman of the group, you will want to see a healthy committee, one with the members enthusiastically participating in the committee's projects and staying involved in its activities over time. Here are some ways you can help the committee avoid some problems:

1. Contact members between meetings
2. Help members realize they have similar basic values in life
3. Encourage the members to develop an appropriate role to play in the committee
4. Help the committee see progress toward its goals
5. Don't always try to discourage splinter groups within the committee
6. Make sure that each person feels he has the opportunity to speak his mind.

Let's look at these approaches in more detail. Each approach is supported both by empirical research in the social sciences and by the judgments of Extension agents with extensive experience working with committees. Although the ideas fit many types of committees, discussion is limited here to relatively small groups of volunteers, who come together face to face to work on certain tasks over a period of time. Before joining the group some of the members may be only slightly familiar with each other.

HELPING PARTICIPATION

Helping participation in committees involves more than simply making sure that each person has the opportunity to take an active role in the group. More importantly, the committee must develop an atmosphere or climate in which people want to participate fully.

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1. **Contact members between meetings.**

A key to maintaining members’ commitment is to keep interest high by talking to them between meetings about committee business. They will often realize they are real members of the group if their advice or ideas are solicited between meetings. There are many additional advantages of these contacts. Members can act as sounding boards for your own ideas about what the committee should do. Such conversations can provide you with early warnings of future problems of participation in the group. If a person is shy or hesitant to play an active role in the committee, you can encourage him to offer his ideas at meetings. You also can find good ideas of members that were not brought out in the group's meetings.

Contacting a member may be especially critical when he or she has missed several meetings of the committee. The contact would keep him abreast of the committee’s activities at the same time as showing him that continued participation in the committee is considered by others to be important. Obviously, unless unusual circumstances require it, he should not be probed to find why he was absent. Such probing may put him on the defensive and reduce the chances of his long term commitment to the committee.

2. **Help members realize they have similar basic values in life.**

Basic values are beliefs about what is important and meaningful in life, e.g., that religion is valuable, that providing children with a good environment is right, that education is needed in these times. Basic values here are not opinions about topics such as what the committee should do next, what the community needs most, or even what’s the best way to solve a problem on which the committee is working.

A person may not be completely aware of the similarity between his basic values and the values of the rest of the committee. His mind may reason that the rest of the group is somewhat similar to him, but his heart may not feel it. For example, this past year a series of meetings was held in one of Indiana's counties. Leaders from an industrialized urban community were asked to discuss their basic values with leaders from the more rural sections of the county. After the meeting, an urban businessman, who was well informed about many aspects of community affairs, mentioned that he was surprised by the discussion. He indicated he had known that urban and rural residents wanted many of the same things, yet he was surprised to find that he and these rural leaders were practically identical in their major goals in life.

Problems caused by people not feeling similar to each other can occur readily when the committee is first organized. This is particularly true when members come from different walks of life; for example, when members have been selected to represent a cross section of the community.

Just talking about the objectives and regular activities of the committee may not bring out the similarities of basic values, although it may help. However, if people are not really aware of the similarity of their basic values, disagreements about small matters can sometimes lead them to think there is little such similarity.

What can be done? Stimulating discussion about their past experiences, about the type of community that would be ideal for them, and about their childhood may help to bring out the members' agreement on basic values. This could be encouraged fairly early in the life of a new committee. Discussions like this, however, can make people uncomfortable in the first one or two meetings. It is usually desirable to wait a meeting or two before stimulating this type of discussion.

A second approach is to stay alert to the
importance of the members' awareness of their shared basic values. When new members join an established committee or when the committee has just had rather strong disagreements about a specific topic, it may be useful for the group to look again at the similarity of their basic values. Encouraging the group to talk briefly about their basic values, while reviewing the basic purposes of the committee, may be beneficial at these times.

At other times there may not be substantial similarity in the basic values of committee members. In such a case, you may want to help decrease the visibility of this disagreement. When committee discussions start to bring out the differences in basic values, leading the discussion in more productive directions may be in order.

3. Encourage members to develop an appropriate role to play in the committee.

When a committee is new or when there has been a big change in membership, many individuals may be somewhat uncertain about exactly what is the right way for them to participate. How much should they say? To whom? On the other hand, when the members agree on what part each person is to play in the committee, they tend to be more comfortable and participate more.

Several points stand out here. First, the leaders of the committee’s activities are not necessarily leaders in the community at large. Although there often may be a tendency for people with higher status in the community to take more initiative in the committee, the community leaders may not be the committee leaders. Further, the leadership within the committee meetings can change from one topic of discussion to another. The point, though, is that the members agree on who are the leaders in a given topic area.

Second, the committee may need more than one type of leader. If a leader tends to initiate a lot of suggestions, make recommendations, and in other ways keep pulling the group toward its objectives, he himself can be irritating at times. Also, he may do little to reduce tensions caused by differences of opinion among members. A second leader may be required, one who raises the group’s spirit and reduces tension and disagreements in the committee. He may make statements agreeing with others, may joke around, may offer encouragement, or point out that the group is progressing in the right direction. This second type of leader is not necessarily the one members look to for direction. But he’s a real leader in the sense that, without him, tensions and disagreements may be unresolved and lead to less participation over time. The two types of leaders may be the same person or they may be different people. But the development of an appropriate leadership often requires that both the task leader and the social-emotional leader be on the committee. If a social-emotional leader doesn’t emerge naturally from the group, it may be necessary to encourage someone to play the role or even play that role yourself. If necessary, a person who can probably play that role may have to be recruited for the committee.

Finally, it’s important for the members to feel that they themselves selected the leaders. If there is a premature push to formally elect leaders, problems may arise later. The leadership may not have had a chance to develop naturally. Later on, the leaders who naturally develop may not fit with the previously elected leaders; participation may be harmed if the elected leaders and the leaders to whom members turn for direction and support are in conflict.

4. Help the committee see progress toward its goals.

When a committee thinks it is making reasonable progress toward goals which the members agreed upon, individuals tend to stay involved in committee activities. There
are three aspects of this. First, it's important that members realize they are making headway toward their objectives. A committee may be making excellent progress, but may not feel it is doing so. The benefit to participation comes from the feeling of progress. Whenever possible, then, bringing the group's attention to its progress may aid participation.

Second, this idea pertains to goals or objectives on which the members agreed. If only a few people have a particular objective and the rest of the committee is just going along, progress may not strikingly help participation. It is valuable, then, to assist members to select a task of concern to as many members as possible. At other times, it can be beneficial to bring the attention of individual members to the relevance of the committee's objectives to their own concerns.

Third, it seems critical that the committee feels that progress is possible, that they can reach their objectives by investing a reasonable amount of effort. If members are told that the problems they must solve are overly difficult or extremely complicated, discouragement or pessimism can develop. Discouragement may be particularly likely if the committee is newly formed or if it does not have a history of successful undertakings to dispel the gloom. This pessimism can hurt participation. Why, a member may wonder, should he actively participate if he is probably wasting his time?

The committee may require particular assistance when working on complex topics needing a long time for solution. A good example is the long-range planning tasks of certain committees. What can be done here, beyond simply bringing members' attention to progress when it occurs? It may be critical to encourage the committee to set long-run objectives that are not only important, but also are ones they can reasonably reach. Too high objectives can produce disappointment. Objectives that can be reached with little effort not only will hurt the group's productivity, but also can discourage members from investing substantial energy in the task.
Finally, it's especially important that a new committee see some headway being made early in its life. Helping the group start out with a task that is both timely and relevant to the group's mission can be essential. Yet if the committee selects as its first task one of monumental difficulty, members may fail to see progress being made. Further, if worst comes to worst, the committee may start off with a history of failure. If the committee is tending to select such a monumental struggle for its first undertaking, you may suggest to them that they start with a more readily doable task. Sometimes, in fact, a task which is actually not as crucial in its own right to the committee's major objectives as is the difficult project may be a better selection. This more feasible task should be one in which everyone can have a part, which is doable in a short period of time, which is at least moderately timely and relevant, and which has easily visible results.

5. Don't always try to discourage splinter groups within the committee.

Sometimes a small number of individuals on a committee tend to band together or in other ways try to direct the entire committee. Such splinter groups may occur in large committees because of communication problems. They develop more readily in committees which include members representing different walks in life.

Although a splinter group can sometimes come to dominate a committee and so hurt participation, it can sometimes be useful. It can allow a person in that group to feel he is making an important contribution to the committee's activities. Further, a splinter group can sometimes aid the progress of the larger committee. An example of this was a committee wrestling with a school problem in one of Indiana's counties. About two years old at this time, the committee was composed of residents of rural areas around the county. Members disagreed among themselves about how to solve this school problem although everyone agreed on what the problem was. Several members from the larger committee then came together in a midnight meeting and decided by themselves to implement their solution to the school problem. The idea was a success. Immediately after the larger committee found out what happened, the uninvolved members were quite upset. But, as the success became apparent, the group saw it was making progress toward its goals and participation was ensured.

Splinter groups become a problem principally when they start to set goals for the entire committee and these goals conflict with the ideas of the rest of the members. In the above example of the school problem, the splinter group did not have goals or priorities different from the rest of the committee -- everyone agreed that the school problem should be handled. Suppose the splinter group did have different goals, i.e., suppose they saw the school situation as a problem, but the rest of the committee thought the schools were fine. In that case, the action of the splinter group would probably have damaged the commitment of the other committee members and so lowered participation.

What can be done when a splinter group is disrupting the larger committee? One possible approach is to put single individuals in the splinter group in contact with single individuals from the larger committee. Having a meeting between the entire splinter group and the rest of the committee often is useless. In a larger meeting the members of the splinter group can support each other and so stand firm against the committee. A second approach is to keep everyone aware of whatever similarity there is in the basic values of all the members of the committee. If all else fails, encourage a group to temporarily select a different topic or task.
6. Make sure that each person feels he has the opportunity to speak his mind.

A person's commitment to the committee tends to be higher when he feels he has the opportunity to influence that committee's activities to a reasonable degree. This doesn't imply that everyone should be encouraged to contribute to the same extent. People with a lot of status in the community or those with expertise in the topic area may think it reasonable to have more impact on the committee's activities than those who do not.

It makes sense to help all persons feel they can make an input to the committee. A person can sometimes be unaware of his opportunities to contribute. Second, if a reluctant member is pushed to speak out more at meetings, his participation in the short run may increase at the expense of long-range commitment to the group. So a strong encouragement to the quiet members of a committee can be tricky and should be approached cautiously, if at all. Finally, the committee may at times require explicit encouragement to set an informal rule that before a final decision is reached, everyone must have had at least one comment on it.

CONCLUSIONS

Disagreement on various topics, feelings of failure, lack of communication among members, and similar reasons can be given by a disgruntled member for reducing his involvement in the committee. Very often, these reasons might have been avoided if the committee had considered the above points.