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Meeting the Challenges of Professional Committee Meetings

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Abstract

Librarians join many professional associations and work on a great number of professional committees over the course of their careers. Working on a committee as a member can be a challenge, and the challenges can be even greater if you are chairing the committee. The authors summarize some of the key points for planning and executing effective and enjoyable meetings. Get tips as well on how to follow through to get results and how to improve future meetings.

Keywords

committees; meetings; chairing

Introduction

Librarians are both intrinsically and extrinsically called to join professional associations over the course of their careers – intrinsically because they are dedicated professionals and find it important to work and collaborate with colleagues in order to advance the profession – extrinsically because they are required to do committee work in order to get tenured and promoted. Working on committees in professional associations has many rewards for both the volunteers involved in committee work as well as for the associations. In a recent article, Robert Thomas listed some of these benefits as educational opportunities, the ability to advocate for change, and the ability to network and to learn how to lead (1-2). But what is required of a "good committee member" and how can new committee members build or cultivate the skills necessary to succeed in this new environment? And as for the committee chairs, how can they thrive and grow in their role as facilitators? Using both the relevant literature as well as the American Library Association *Tip Sheets* and podcasts titled *Making*

the Meeting: Resources for Conducting Effective Meetings, this article highlights best practices for effective committee work.

Two specific roles are involved in the work of committees – the chair's (or co-chair's) role and the member's role. The people filling each of these two roles need to attain a working knowledge of the expectations and associated responsibilities necessary to contribute effectively to the collective efforts of the committee. Edwina Wontner describes some of the key goals a committee chair needs to focus on as the work of the committee progresses. In particular, the chair is responsible for "… instilling a sense of unity, urgency, and common spirit among a diverse group while maintaining a sense of enjoyment" and for "… guiding and steering volunteers and ensuring activities are done" (46).

Other members of the committee, then, need to be connected and engaged with the committee's work, follow up on delegated tasks, and contribute to important discussions. And it is helpful to remember that today's member is tomorrow's chair, and vice versa!

Meetings

The "meeting" is the most public and frequent venue for committee work. According to Janice Francisco, "[c]reating and facilitating effective meetings require three things: 1) preparation; 2) conducting and documenting the meeting; and 3) following up" (54). Both chairs and members have specific roles to play in each of the above stages. Robert Moran notes that "Meetings are not merely discussions of work-related issues. They are small-group interactions with all the dynamics of small groups. Behavior is determined by much more than an interest in a solution to the problem before the group.

Because these dynamics affect both meeting process and outcomes, they need to be understood" (135). The committee chair truly needs to be a Renaissance person. To some extent, the chair of any committee needs to be a politician who determines who will participate and how discussions will be conducted, a project manager who plans and executes all relevant logistics of the meeting, and an organizational psychologist who understands how to communicate with and motivate the individuals on the committee to solve relatively complex problems. Additionally, on a library committee, the chair is also likely to be a librarian, skilled in the knowledge as well as the varied arts of librarianship.

Before the Meeting

For the Chair

Most committees are created sometime before their first formal meeting. The ALA *Checklist of Chairs of Committees* can be particularly helpful at this time, as it describes the work that an effective chair needs to do to set the stage for effective committee work. In particular, incoming chairs need to consult with the

previous chair or co-chairs of the committee in order to identify the relevant issues and work that needs to be done. Soon after this consultation, the informed chair needs to contact the committee members to work out the logistics of communication and meetings (ALA, *Checklist).* Both Moran and the ALA *Checklist of Chairs of Committees* note the basic steps for planning and preparing for successful meetings. These steps include distributing appropriate background information to all attendees in a timely manner as well as creating and disseminating a detailed agenda that includes all items to be discussed. Each agenda item necessitating a decision should also include a note focusing on the required background information, the anticipated outcome of the discussion, and the time allocated to the brainstorming and decision phases of the discussion. Moran is vehement that materials required for meetings always be distributed in advance, and they should never be distributed to be read during the meeting time. Rather, it is better to reschedule the meeting (138).

For Committee Members

The implication for committee members is significant as they, too, need to be prepared. They also need to review the agenda critically, considering additional items for possible inclusion. Additionally, they need to review all relevant background documentation in relation to the goals of the planned discussion.

During the Meeting

The two basic types of meetings described by Moran are "information-sharing meetings" and "decision-making meetings." Most committee meetings are a hybrid of these two types of meetings, and the structure of an information-sharing meeting is rather simple and intuitive. The type of meeting that tends to be more difficult is the decision-making meeting, and the structure and dynamics of these types of meetings is not generally well known or practiced. Two specific phases characterize and underscore effectiveness in the classic decision-making meeting. The first phase encompasses the brainstorming session in which any and all possible solutions are allowed to arise as the discussion proceeds. "Openness, creativity, and freedom are essential" in this phase, and the participants temporarily need to refrain from all analysis and evaluation (Moran 137). As this type of communal brainstorming is rarely practiced effectively, a talented facilitator is essential in order to build or cultivate the group's skills in this important methodology and to minimize "… the tendency to identify a solution for implementation as quickly as possible" (Moran 137). Then, the second phase of decision-making discussions focuses on the actual choice or selection of one of the brainstormed alternatives. It is at this point that analysis and evaluation return to the discussion, and it is with this mode of dialogue that most members are familiar. Communication in the above phases can be occasionally difficult or problematic. Moran recommends a powerful antidote to the occasional communication problems: "Questioning on the part of the listener and restatement on the part of the speaker…"(136).

For the Chair

The final element of the effective meeting puzzle is actually managing the meeting as it progresses. Robert White's concept of "letting go" is particularly important for the committee chair. By letting go, White means that even though the chair's opinions on the topics discussed by the members are important, the chair really needs to focus on facilitation of the overall discussion so that all members of the committee are able to contribute to the resolution of the issue or problem (8). Having formal rules or guidelines that are articulated regularly can be especially helpful in relation to effective meeting management. For example, Moran emphasizes the importance of the chair focusing on and sticking to the agenda, deciding how decisions on the agenda items will be made (consensus or majority vote), and delineating clearly between agenda items' brainstorming phase and evaluation phase.

Chairs also have procedural duties to perform as the meeting progresses. They need to focus on the agenda and be sure that timely progress is made on all important items, summarize the key points and the progress made, and determine the dates for the completion of action items. Even beyond process, the chairs need to attend to the various affective needs of the members at the meeting by noting their contributions to the committee's progress and by expressing a degree of appreciation for the committee members' time and efforts. Specific agenda items, inevitably, will generate discussions in which the members disagree. Disagreement, hot or contentious issues, digressions, interruptions, domination of the discussion by a particular member, and other contingencies need to be managed effectively by the chair. New chairs or co-chairs, in particular, need to be aware of the relatively common contingencies, difficulties, or "pitfalls" associated with the dynamics of committee meetings. Fortunately, the ALA *Tip Sheets* offer detailed and helpful recommendations for dealing with these issues or contingencies. In particular, the *Tip Sheets* provide logical approaches to problem solving as well as a series of "mini-scripts" for potentially contentious meetings or difficult situations (ALA, *Resources*).

For Committee Members

The members need to assume mutual responsibility for following the formal rules or guidelines as the meeting progresses (Moran 138). White also discusses two key points that underscore the need for some formal rules. His points, "fairness and the process" and "ground rules and feeling safe" are really two sides of the same coin. Both points concern the need for ground rules to be established and adhered to by all committee members in conducting meetings so that open and honest communication is promoted (White 9).

After the Meeting

For the Chair

Following the meeting, chairs need to reflect on the results attained (or not attainted). Mickey Zemon suggests that, in this after-meeting reflection, the chair or co-chairs should be "… evaluating group progress and following up on items addressed at the meeting. Assess the meeting in terms of your before-meeting goals and planning efforts. Did the agenda items get covered? Were participants prepared? Were discussions productive? Did most committee members participate?"(7). The feedback obtained from this analysis can be used to improve the work and dynamics of future meetings.

For Committee Members

Francisco suggests having feedback forms for the participants to complete after the meeting has been conducted. The committee members' role in completing such forms can be a hard one, but honest answers are vital for the smooth functioning of the group. It is essential for the improvement and smooth functioning of the group that they give fair, yet tactful, feedback. The types of questions on these forms include: how much was achieved, how well the time was used, how well the members were encouraged to participate, how good the decisions were, how doable the next steps seem, and how well the meeting was conducted (Francisco 58).

Concluding Comments

Committee work is critically important in facilitating the work of regional, national, and international committees. The creative ideas, vibrant energies, and hard work of the members are collectively represented in the achievements of the various associations' committees. But, committee work is more than agendas, schedules, and the completion of tasks. Committee work is really about creating and nurturing relationships as well as working in collaborative efforts to attain personal and organizational goals. And it is about mentoring, accountability, and learning.

Accountability on committees in professional associations is important but is occasionally dismissed or simply ignored. So, do we consistently view the work on these committees as immediately relevant as the work in our libraries or information centers? Hopefully we do, but occasionally, as members of a specific committee, we fail to respond expeditiously to calls, messages, or other queries; and occasionally we fail to complete important tasks in a timely way. These tasks and the associated follow-up underscore effective committee work in professional associations. Members of committees, including chairs or others in positions of responsibility, need to view the work of these committees as particularly relevant, or certainly as important as other professional work.

All members of a committee in an association are responsible for the work of the committee and are expected to contribute. In a sense, we are working and contributing in a social, political context. Those who recognize the dynamics or realities of this social, political context are more likely to succeed. And those who are effective members of committees are more likely to be recognized and viewed positively in the association and in the profession. Committees do not exist in a vacuum but are connected or interrelated to the other units or committees in an association. Or, as a colleague on a committee with one of the authors of this article stated several years ago: "It's a small world, isn't it?"

Service on committees also provides excellent opportunities to learn. In her article on the role of professional associations, Julie Virgo describes associations as a "body of people who collectively have a tremendous wealth of experiences to draw upon in a common field" (189). This collection of experiences is available to librarians contributing to the work of committees. "Those who participate become familiar with the committee's responsibilities as well as the rationale for the existence of the committee. They also become involved in the collection and synthesis of data or information, in various planning processes, and in the implementation of recommendations" (Frank 307). Librarians who become chairs or coordinators of committees have additional opportunities to learn. "The chair of the committee articulates the rationale for the committee's activities, relating the work of the committee to other committees or organizational units in the association. He or she becomes more familiar with the dynamics of conducting meetings, including the ability to attain a positive consensus on important decisions" (Frank 308).

One's work on a committee is basically a function or reflection of the librarian's personal integrity. It can also be a positive or less than positive reflection of the professional's library or home institution. Become familiar with the roles and responsibilities of effective committee membership. Study, do the work, follow up as needed, and respond as necessary. Learn to thrive in committee meetings. Realize and appreciate the special opportunities for professional growth that committee memberships afford.

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