

How to Run a Committee

A Guide for Committee Chairs

*Developed by the
Transportation Research Board*

Foreword

Recognizing that not all committees succeed in accomplishing their missions, TRB staff members asked chairs of some of the more successful committees to tell us their secrets for success. This guide is a synthesis of advice received from those dedicated leaders, presented in the hope that all chairs will benefit from this knowledge.

Successful Chairing for a Successful Committee

Although chairs must be knowledgeable of their committee's subject matter they will also learn a lot as work progresses. Effective committees and successful chairs learn from each other. The key to success is through chairs' communication skills. They must be good listeners, good communicators, and good organizers. Successful chairs:

- ✓ **Communicate** with members regularly.
- ✓ **Communicate** clearly all pertinent information regarding committee activities and expectations
- ✓ **Follow up** every request so that committee members understand specifics of what is requested.
- ✓ **Keep** as many committee members involved as possible; do not hesitate to write, email, phone, or converse with others who are interested in the committee's activities.
- ✓ **Answer** all correspondence quickly.
- ✓ **Praise** members' good work in writing and verbally at meetings.
- ✓ **Maintain** a sense of humor.



Some Helpful "Do's"

Successful chairs should make their committees "fountains of knowledge" by:

- ✓ **Locating** those engaged in research on your subject(s) or those who have at least more than casual interest. You will get more done by a couple of interested members than by a dozen others.
- ✓ **Checking** all sources available on your subject (s). Ask committee members and other interested parties to keep you informed. (Interested committee members may be assigned an area and be made responsible for covering it. TRB information services are available for committee activities; use them.)
- ✓ **Following** leads for papers. Do not hesitate to ask for a commitment from an author. (If not suitable, the paper can be turned down later-though it may be

somewhat embarrassing. TRB staff representatives are a storehouse of suggested face-saving devices if the paper proves to be a dud.)

- ✓ **Communicating** often, since few people respond to a general invitation. A personal request usually brings faster results.
- ✓ **Supervising** task(s) until accomplished; then praise committee member(s) (privately and publicly) for a job well done.

Journey to Success

STEP 1. FORMING THE BEST COMMITTEE

Be selective. Don't accept every applicant. Look for potentially good committee members by contacting leaders in the field. Then follow up on their suggestions.

Before making any appointments, tell prospective committee members what is expected of them (e.g., attendance at the Annual Meeting; 40 hours per year devoted to committee work, etc.) You may lose some good candidates, but you will know that they probably would not have devoted enough time to your committee to make their expertise count.

STEP 2. ORGANIZING THE COMMITTEE

Establish well-defined, challenging, and reasonable tasks that will provide benefits (i.e. increased knowledge in committee members' area of interest) to committee members.

Each task should be assigned with a definite completion date: make assignments relatively brief. However, if task will take longer than one year, note each year's accomplishments.

Give each subcommittee a specific assignment and a time to report on their results.

When assigning tasks to committee members, emphasize the importance of their task in relation to other committee members' work and task completion.

Put each committee member on at least one subcommittee-and preferably only one subcommittee.

Each committee member must be an active contributor to committee activities. The presence of any who does not work or is not encouraged to contribute simply acts as a contagious disease.

STEP 3. RECOGNIZING COMMITTEE DUTIES

Some of the committee's duties are as follow:

- Disseminate important research findings (each year).
- Generate research needs and research problem statements.
 - What are the problems in this area?
 - How do they arise in your area?
 - What is known about the solutions?
 - How are the problems currently handled in practice?
 - What are the recommended practices?
 - What problems have not been satisfactorily solved?
 - What problems are being studied in current research? (Remember, TRB information services are available for committee use.)
 - How are these problems being researched?
 - What unsolved problems represent research needs?
 - What aspects of the problem can be researched?
 - Prepare Research Problem Statements.
 - Encourage research, research reporting (TRB papers), and research application.
 - Prepare application bulletins.
 - Deliver committee conferences, workshops, seminars, etc.

Remember, it is the chair who, in the final analysis, must assemble the committee output for its approval. Tasks should be planned this way from the outset.

STEP 4. MAKING COMMITTEE MEETINGS PRODUCTIVE

Prepare an agenda and distribute it to committee members before the meeting; have extra copies available at the meeting. (This will help keep the meeting on schedule and will keep committee members' attention on the agenda.)

Introduce committee members at the outset of the meeting using first names and an informal procedure for conducting meetings, involving all committee members in the discussion. (This will allow committee members to develop relationships, ensuring that they will work together.)

Attempt to keep committee meetings on a discussion basis rather than permitting debates to develop.

If people of TRB committee-member caliber are made aware of the agenda for the next meeting, ongoing tasks, status of committee projects, and individual member contributions to committee projects (suggestions, facts, opportunities, ideas, ideals, etc.), and if the actions and enthusiasm of committee members are visible enough, the committee will appear to be a source worthy of personal contribution. If this happens, communication will have taken place and committee efforts will be successful.

Is the Committee Succeeding?

One way of checking the pulse of the committee is to measure the level and types of communication. The following indicators might be informative:

VITAL, ALIVE: Participation is high and growing, volunteers are plentiful, assignments are completed on time, and new ideas are being generated.

ALIVE, but SICK: Some products are being generated. However, participation is stagnant and much of correspondence and discussions contain questions, complaints, excuses, unrelated results, long-overdue contributions to committee activities, and/or irrelevant or poorly conceived suggestions.

DEAD or DYING: Participation is waning. Correspondence and discussions are one-way only (no feedback) except for small talk, selling of personal pet ideas, poor judging of activities, results and plans of "others," resignations, and subcommittee reports obviously written at the last minute just to be the deadline.

If all the above fail: Get rid of **deadwood**.
Re-evaluate **need** for committee and/or its **scope**.
Be Ruthless!