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Snippet #136 Committee Reports

“Committees start with a question to be answered; boards start with a decision to be made.”

-- Colette Collier Trohan

This simple statement can help both boards and committees do their jobs more effectively. Committee (and even staff) reports need to be focused on one outcome: giving whoever asked for the report a clear decision to make. Committees are subordinate bodies – they dive deeper and take longer, and their work product can either make life easier or be a wasted effort.

The starting point for a committee is the question, unless it was formed to perform a specific task such as choose an award recipient or plan an event. It's the board's job to formulate the question it wants answered. If the board has all the information and insight it needs, there's no need for a committee. Suppose, for example, the board is thinking about having the association website redesigned, but there are many options to choose from and lots of vendors with varied strengths and weaknesses. An important factor in choosing a vendor will be how interactive the new site should be. Will it host communities, allow members to update their own information, or deliver educational content? This question requires some research and study, so it is given to a committee, who reports back.

The first paragraph of the report is a short description of the question the committee was asked to resolve. It might also include other questions that surfaced during its work. If too many questions arise, the committee should go back to the board and ask for interim decisions or clarification. Too often the board gives the committee “charges” that are a list of thinly-disguised tasks to perform with the outcomes already known. Instead, look for open-ended questions and put those brilliant minds to work.

The next section of the report describes the options that were explored. What did the committee find out about each option? What were the pros and cons? Were there unforeseen consequences? If an option was accepted or rejected, why? Here's also where the committee should challenge assumptions in favor of the facts about the issue. Are the (assumed) best practices really best for this situation? Are there better alternatives? This research phase should be clearly explained.

Once the committee has gathered its facts, it meets to determine which option it recommends. A committee that does research but doesn't interpret it doesn't perform a service. Can the committee agree on an approach? Does one option rise above the rest? If the committee is divided it can't give the board a decision to be made. Conclusions that contain the word “or” don't recommend clear decisions.

Last, the recommendation of the committee is stated at the end of the report in the form of a motion for the board to adopt. The board is free to amend or reject the motion, but it will do so with the input from the committee report. A report that simply gives information and no way of acting on it forces the board to “do committee work” and create a motion on the spot – and those types of motions are seldom well thought out or coherent. When the committee creates the motion it brings its work full circle: question, options, choices, recommendation. Note that the report does not include the number of committee meetings, the hours worked, and the wonderful camaraderie the members shared.