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Snippet #152 Refer to Committee

The motion to refer to committee has several interesting variations, It just might be the most flexible and strategic motion in the great member's tool kit.

Deliberative assemblies start with a decision to be made; committees start with a question to be answered. If there are questions and unresolved issues, the motion process isn't very efficient: it's intended to be a high level deliberation on the merits of the proposed action, and most – if not all – the logistical questions should have been asked and answered before true deliberation begins. When the motion is not ready for a decision, when there are unanswered questions, or when there's a topic that needs more exploration, the motion to refer can handle it all.

If a main motion is on the floor when the motion to refer is made, it means that whatever was on the floor (including amendments) go to the committee, which will report its findings and recommendations. Any amendments that go to the committee must be reported back to the assembly so that the assembly can dispose of them by adopting, rejecting, or modifying them. The committee can make recommendations on the amendments or even propose a substitute, but it's the assembly that takes the final action.

The details of the motion (such as which committee, what size, membership, how appointed, scope of authority) can be part of the motion or, after a motion to refer to committee is adopted, can be set by another motion with a majority vote. But the most important details, which committee or how appointed, should be settled as part of the original motion. For example, a delegate who feels the chair is being heavy-handed might move that the motion be referred to a committee elected by the assembly, thus taking appointment of the members out of the hands of the chair. Another strategy is to move to refer to a committee so that there will be an opportunity to influence the outcome of the committee's recommendations, which will in turn likely influence the assembly when the motion returns to it.

A motion that is referred, that falls under the jurisdiction of a standing committee, is automatically sent to that committee before coming to the assembly. The assembly can refer it back to the same committee for more consideration or can then refer it to a different committee, but a motion from the floor that encroaches on a standing committee's responsibility must be sent to that committee.

Motions that show polarization can be referred to a committee made up of those on both sides, who can, with the benefit of time, work out a compromise that will be acceptable enough to achieve the necessary votes to move forward.

A motion to refer to a committee can also be made when there's no motion pending: if you like to keep track of fancy parliamentary terms, it's in the group class called incidental main motions. Basically, you can make a main motion to form a committee for a particular purpose. It follows the same rules as the motion to refer: it's debatable, amendable, and requires a majority vote to adopt. This can be especially helpful to get an action started when there isn't enough concrete information. In this case the motion might be to "form a committee to investigate and recommend...." In some cases, the committee process might go through several stages before the final motions are generated and considered.

Referral can also be a way to postpone. Normally, motions cannot be postponed beyond the next regular meeting, but a motion could be referred to a committee or staff with instructions to report it back at a more distant future date.

The motion to refer buys time—to get more information, develop a new approach, or rally your forces for a critical vote.