

# Making Committees Work

A committee, as understood in parliamentary law, is a body of one or more persons, elected or appointed by an assembly to consider, investigate, or take action on certain matters or subjects, or to do all these.

## **To function effectively, a committee, and especially its chair, needs to have**

1. A list of committee members.
2. A copy of the motion or problem referred to the committee.
3. Special instructions to the committee, if any. These instructions should include a statement of exactly what the committee is expected to do, and whether the question is referred to it for discussion, study, hearings, investigations, recommendations, or action.
4. A statement of the powers and duties of the committee.
5. Copies of all papers or correspondence relating to the subject assigned to the committee.
6. Copies of any rules, policies, or decisions of the organization relating to the subject.
7. Information on the type of report desired and the date set for its presentation.

## **Reports from committees should minimally contain**

1. A statement of the charge to the committee
2. A statement of the methods employed by the committee in accomplishing its charge.
3. A summary of information gathered or work done.
4. A statement of conclusions or findings.
5. A specific recommendation, together with a rationale for that recommendation.
6. The names of the members on the committee.
7. A summary (often called an "executive summary" at the beginning of the report is helpful for long reports.

The next section elaborates the nature and content of committee reports.

# The Committee Report

**By whom should the report be prepared?** Usually a member of the committee (often the chair or a recorder, but it could be anyone) prepares a draft of the report. All members of the

committee should be given opportunity to review and revise the draft before it is submitted. It is not the drafter's work product, but the product of the entire committee.

**To whom should the report be made?** In most cases the committee is addressed to the appointing or supervising authority. Occasionally, particularly at the direction of the authority, a report may go to other individuals or organizations.

**What form should the report take?** There is no universally mandatory form, but some principles help guide us. Reports should go forward with a written and an oral report; both should be planned carefully to be effective. Exactly what goes into each depends on a large number of factors: the audience, the nature of the problem and the solution, time available, how much information is needed by the higher authority for decision making, and so forth. The report should be prepared and organized to accomplish two ends: (1) to persuade the higher authority to adopt the report & its recommendations and (2) to facilitate the decision-making of the higher authority. A reports need not necessarily be long (being too long may discourage anyone from reading it), but needs to be long enough to competently and persuasively present the plan and justify it to the higher authority. Whatever format is decided upon, the report should meet high professional standards: typed, spell and grammar checked, etc.; a computer and printer makes this easier.

**What content should the reports contain?** The report should be written to have an impact on those who read it. After reading the content, the reader must be convinced the conditions the proposal seeks to remedy are serious enough to justify action, understand the details of the proposal and how it will remedy the problem conditions, and be assured that the proposal is practical, reasonable, and will bring no undesirable side outcomes. The reader must also believe the proposal is the best alternative. Although the content and organization of the content is flexible and should be adapted to each situation, several content elements are usually "necessary" to fulfill the functions of a report:

**Executive Summary.** Especially in longer reports (probably over 8 pages), it is a good idea to have an Executive Summary in which the whole report (including purpose, problem, solution, rationale, and recommendations) is summarized in a few paragraphs, not to exceed one page in length. Explain the purposes of the report. Is it an interim or final report? Is it to outline factual findings, conclusions, or recommendations? Is it to summarize actions of the committee or does it propose a project or program in solution to a problem?

**Preamble.** A preamble or introduction contains boilerplate information (such as the name of the committee and the names of the members), a statement of the charge or mission given to the committee (making the organizational context of the report clear), and a review of the procedures used in the problem solving process.

**Background.** The report should give needed background on the nature of the problem indicating a need for a solution. Succinctly and objectively, the committee's factual findings and conclusions about the nature of the problem, its causes, its effects, and related matters should be presented. Appropriate documentation should be given. If there is a large amount of material as a result of the committee's work, often this material is best summarized briefly in the report with supporting documents placed in an appendix.

**Proposed solution.** The report should give a detailed presentation of the solution to the problem, including an implementation plan, organizational chart, and budget. An implementation plan can include such things as

- 1. Goals and objectives.** Goals point to the qualitative ideals or values the solution supports; they inspire motive and enable unity of action. Objectives are the statement of particular activities which, if achieved, result in the accomplishment of the goals.
- 2. Statement of personnel.** From goals and objectives, we derive particular tasks that can be done by particular individuals. Often an organization chart makes clear the various task roles and their interrelationships. Reports should make clear what people will be assigned to which tasks and task roles.
- 3. Space, materials, and logistics.** The proposal must make clear what resources are needed, including facilities, communications, computers, telephone, mailing, etc.
- 4. Finances and budget.** Linked to the above, the costs of the program (personnel, materials, mailing, gasoline, etc.) should be clearly and accurately projected. If possible, the plan should also indicate the source of funds.
- 5. Time.** The report should project a timetable for the accomplishment of the various objectives and tasks to facilitate the operation of the plan. Who is to do what by when?
- 6. Evaluation and impact.** Proposals are more likely to be approved if the higher authority has a clear idea of how to tell if the investment of time and money was worth it. Explain how to evaluate the success of the program. Specify who will be affected or inconvenienced by the new program.

**Rationale.** The report should make an argued defense of the proposed solution, generally including (1) how the plan will meet the need; (2) why the plan is desirable in light of relevant absolute and/or relative criteria; and (3) why the plan has advantages and fewer disadvantages compared to alternative responses to the problem, including doing nothing.

**Recommendation.** The report should clearly present a request for the higher authority to take some action on the work of the committee; sometimes this function is done in the Preamble. For example, if the committee's function is largely advisory, then the report should request that the committee be informed of actions or decisions on the matters covered in the report. If the committee's role was to provide information, then the request might be that the receipt of the information be acknowledged. If the committee's role was decision-making or action-taking, then the request should be for feedback to guide future work.