

## EMPOWERING YOURSELF AS A COMMITTEE MEMBER

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On virtually all campuses, committees are the traditional way to evaluate problems and deal with institutional problems; indeed many institutional changes cannot be made without some committee's approval. Most of the information described here can be applied to formal committees, subcommittees and boards as well as informal task forces, working groups and advocacy groups. This information is also very useful when participating in departmental meetings. Not all strategies will be appropriate for all committees or all individuals. You'll want to pick out those that make sense to you and with which you are comfortable.

*In order for you to bring about institutional change and to increase the likelihood that what you want to accomplish may actually happen, you need to increase your own power. For some people, oftentimes especially women, "power" is a "dirty word" but in order to make change happen, women must be powerful. Being powerful means the ability to use yourself in such a way so that what you want to have happen occurs. Politics, including institutional politics, is about how power is used. This paper provides some strategies to help you become a more powerful player in the game of institutional and committee politics.*

### CHOOSING WHICH COMMITTEE(S) TO SERVE ON: WHAT INFORMATION DO YOU NEED BEFORE YOU SAY "YES?"

In making your decision, here are some questions to think about:

- What do you want to accomplish *for yourself* by being on the committee?
- What do you want to accomplish *for the institution* by being on the committee?
- Are you are interested in the subject matter or will you be bored silly?
- Will membership further your career/promotion/tenure?
- Who else serves on the committee?
- How much power does the committee have to actually influence the institution? (Generally institution-wide committees have more status and power.)
- Does this committee have a bad reputation -- is it non-productive or disorganized, etc.

*How can you obtain this information?* Talking to people to gather information is also important because it presents an opportunity as a way to influence the way they will view you; it is a chance to present yourself to persons you know as well as those you do not know.

- Call the Chair of the committee.
- Call some current or former members, even if you don't know them.
- Ask other people who are knowledgeable about campus politics.

*Ask questions such as the following* (you can do this even if you are not a member but are looking around for a committee on which to serve):

- What are the Committee's objectives-- long and short range?
- What it has accomplished in the past?
- How many women/people of color serve on the committee? Being the first or only woman and/or a person of color is sometimes difficult.
- How does the committee operate?
- What are its strengths?
- What are its weaknesses?
- How often does it meet --how much time is involved in committee membership?
- Do members serve on subcommittees as well?

Keep in mind that you don't have to say "yes" to every invitation to join or volunteer for a committee. It's okay to be too busy, although you may want to keep the door open for another time. Don't overload yourself; after all, on how many committees can you productively serve?

#### **AFTER YOU'VE ACCEPTED YOUR COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP**

You've been appointed, elected or you volunteered --what should you do next?

Become informed about the committee. Not only will you learn more about the committee's activities, you'll also be in the position of developing future allies. If you haven't done the following already, it is time to do them now.

- Call the chair and ask for a set of the previous years papers, handouts, reports, minutes etc., and actually read them. Be sure to thank the chair after you receive them.

- **Call as many of the committee members that you can, including those you with whom you might disagree. If possible, have lunch or meet with several of the members. Tell the members you are interested in being a productive member and want to learn more about the committee before your first meeting.**
- **In addition to the questions listed previously, ask questions, such as:**
  - **Who are the more productive and powerful members?**
  - **If there are subcommittees, ask what they do and which ones are important.**
  - **Do they have any advice for you?**
  - **Is there anything you need to know in advance?**
  - **Does this committee act in a very formal manner (strict Robert's Rules of Order) or informally?**

#### **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND ALLIES**

**Every time you talk with others, you are developing relationships and possible allies. Allies are an important part of committee membership since decisions are not always made on the basis of information alone. In addition to just talking to people, here are some ways to develop relationships and allies.**

- **Come early for meetings and stay late. Sometimes it is hard for women to join a group of men in a conversation because some of the men may ignore her. It is far easier to have a one-on-one conversation. Coming earlier and staying late makes this possible.**
- **Praise committee members when they have been particularly effective by calling them or sending an e-mail or a note such as "I was impressed with your ability to synthesize the different points of view and bring us together," and "I thought your comments about X subject were right on target."**
- **If possible, stay on good terms with those who oppose you. You never know when you need an ally at another time. You can say something like "You and I often disagree but I really respect your fairness on this issue."**

#### **YOUR FIRST MEETING**

- **Observe where people sit -- sometimes people have preferred seats and you don't want to take their "traditional" place. Often but not always, the more powerful people sit closer to the chair.**

- **Observe the meeting dynamics: Who are the more powerful and less powerful persons? Whose suggestions are adopted more often than others, who is questioned for their opinion, who gets called on more often? Who are the individuals who bring the group together by coming up with workable compromises? (Less powerful people are often interrupted, not called on, get less eye contact, get less credit or no credit for their ideas, and are often ignored.)**
- **Take notes and be attentive. Your notes might also include items for follow-up such as getting more information, calling someone, etc.**
- **If you are puzzled by any of the committee's actions or if you need information and do not want to take the committee's time, ask someone individually at the end of the meeting or in a subsequent phone call, e-mail or note.**

## **INTRODUCING YOUR AGENDA**

**If you have something you want to introduce, the following might be helpful:**

- **Know your subject matter and be prepared to answer questions. Gather information in advance from some of the people who would be affected if your suggestion were implemented, including those who would actually be implementing it.**
  - **What is the problem?**
  - **Whom does it affect and how?**
  - **What will your suggestion accomplish?**
  - **How will it be implemented?**
  - **What are the fiscal implications, if any?**
  - **What are the problems people may have in supporting your idea?**
  - **What are the arguments that might be used against your idea and what are the counter arguments?**
  - **Who are your likely supporters and opponents?**

## **INTRODUCING IMPORTANT AND/OR CONTROVERSIAL IDEAS**

- **Check with several members *in advance* to see if they will support it. If there isn't a chance of acceptance:**
  - **You may not want to introduce it at all.**

- You may want to delay introducing it until you have built up support, or,
  - You may still want to introduce it as a way of educating the committee and planting seeds for the future. Sometimes the only result in doing so may be simply sensitizing members' thinking. However, that might be the first step in eventually getting your idea (or some version of it) approved, i.e., developing an awareness that there is a problem. Often the first time an issue is raised, nothing may happen. But each time it is subsequently raised, the chances of its being passed are substantially better because of the previous awareness that has occurred.
- In most instances as a matter of courtesy, you might want to let the chair know in advance that you are planning to bring up a particular subject. The more controversial the subject, the more important it is to let the chair know what you are planning to do.
  - Ask committee (or department) members, especially the more influential ones and the chair, for advice in gaining acceptance for your idea. Most people enjoy being asked for advice and you don't have to necessarily follow it. Often they will feel as if they "own" a piece of the problem you have brought to them and may become a stronger supporter or a less vocal opponent of both you and your idea. Equally important, these members will often give you very good advice.
  - Include potential opponents among those you might ask for advice because you are in a stronger position if you know others' arguments against your ideas in advance and are prepared to defend your position. You also may gain their respect so that you have future allies on other issues.
  - Thank the people whom you asked for advice (whether you follow it or not) for their time and help. You can do this with a follow up note, e-mail or call.
  - Sometimes it is better, especially if you are a relatively new or junior member of the committee (or department), to have someone else bring up the subject or idea, which you then can support. Having a powerful member of the group introduce it makes it more likely that others will support it.
  - For some controversial recommendations, including a review process approximately one year later is often helpful in gathering support from those who are partially supportive but with some reservations. Thus a controversial idea may be more acceptable if it includes a review (by a specific individual or office and within specific time frames) one year later. That review might be by the

committee or by some other body within the institution so that the committee can decide if further action is needed.

- In some instances, generating letters of support from individuals and/or relevant campus organizations to a committee can be helpful, as well as letters describing the problem your idea or suggestion is likely to improve. For issues involving students, letters from parents as well as students themselves are useful. Often you can quietly or indirectly generate such letters of support.
- For issues such as those affecting specific groups such as women, people of color, and gay or lesbian individuals, advocacy groups can be of help in developing a sense of urgency and providing information. Various campus organizations, such as student groups, committees or commissions on the status of women, faculty and staff groups may also be source of support. It is also critical that before you introduce your motion that you have obtained the support of those groups who will be affected by your suggestion.
- Thank people and groups who have supported you with a note, email or phone call.

#### **DEALING WITH PEOPLE WHO DISAGREE WITH YOU**

Often there are people on a committee (or within the department) who are opposed to the things you hold near and dear to your heart. If you are dealing with controversial and emotional issues there may be some people who will not be pleasant to deal with.

- Try not to view them as enemies. Keep in mind you never know when they may support you on an issue you care about.
- If possible, find ways to praise them such as “You and I disagree a lot, but I really feel you were very fair on this issue.”
- If appropriate, have lunch and pick the person’s brains by asking for advice.
- If someone treats you badly, some of the techniques listed in “Seven Selected Strategies to Deal With a Chilly Climate” may be useful. (Available at [www.bernicessandler.com](http://www.bernicessandler.com).)

#### **IMPLEMENTING A MOTION OR REPORT: HOW TO GET THINGS MOVING**

Often a committee passes a motion or completes a report and nothing ever happens afterwards. The following strategies may help:

- Some motions need to state who has the responsibility for implementation, along with a time frame, such as “The Committee Chair will write a letter no later than November 1 to the Vice President notifying her of our motion and asking that she respond to us no later than Dec. 1 of this year.”

Similarly, committee reports and their recommendations are often buried and never acted upon. The following may be helpful:

- In addition to disseminating a report, the committee can ask the person or body receiving the report (such as a Vice President or other committee) to separate the recommendations and send each one to the appropriate person in charge of the unit or area that will be affected by the recommendation. The letter accompanying the recommendations should ask for a response to the recommendations as described in the following section, “Getting the Director or Vice President to React to the Recommendations.”
- The committee (or a small part of the committee) might meet with the Vice President, the Director, or whoever is the appropriate person for implementation. Such meetings need to be carefully planned and here are some things that may help. (Most of these strategies evolved from the National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education in Washington, DC in connection with their meetings with high government officials.
  - Find out in advance how many people the Director and/or Vice President will have at the meeting. Bring more people than they have, if possible.
  - It is useful if everyone who attends brings a notebook and takes notes throughout the meeting. This helps not only in recalling the meeting accurately but also makes your group appear powerful and professional.
  - Have a pre-meeting of those who will be attending the meeting with the persons responsible for approval and implementation.
  - If possible, everyone who wants to speak at the actual meeting should attend the pre-meeting. The pre-meeting is important so that during the actual meeting, the group raises only those issues on which everyone agrees. Disagreements among the group during the actual meeting weaken the power of the group immensely. It will be important to let other members who plan to attend the “real” meeting (and who did not attend the pre-meeting) know what happened at the pre-meeting and what topics were agreed upon to be raised.

During the pre-meeting topics are assigned and one person is selected as chair of the meeting (or the Chair of the committee may act as the chair of the meeting). The Chair's task is to move the meeting along, e.g., "Mary, you wanted to raise the issue of the curriculum revision process."

*Getting the Director or Vice Director to react to the recommendations:*

- After the recommendations are reported, the chair summarizes and asks for a second meeting date to obtain the Director or Vice President's reaction in writing to the recommendations, including which recommendations are to be implemented or rejected. This is discussed more fully in "Why A Second Meeting?"
- If at all possible, the group should not leave the office without a date for a second meeting, hopefully within two - six weeks.
- If major institutional changes are being recommended, you can suggest that an email or memo to the campus might come from their office after the second meeting. Having a second meeting may then appear to be in the Director's or Vice President's self-interest.

**AFTER THE MEETING**

- The chair writes a letter to the Director or Vice President, thanking him/her for the meeting, and summarizing what was discussed, the date of the next meeting and the information that person will give your group at the second meeting about the recommendations and their implementation. (See following section.)
- A week or so before the second meeting, the chair should call the Director's or Vice President's office or write a letter to remind him or her of the upcoming meeting and its agenda. It is not unusual for the meeting to be postponed at that point; it is important that a new date be set up as soon as possible.

**WHY A SECOND MEETING?**

The second meeting is for the Director or Vice President to convey to your group the following information:



- Which recommendations are accepted;
- What office and which person in that office will be in charge of implementation for each recommendation that is accepted;
- What is the time-frame for implementation for each recommendation; and
- If a recommendation is rejected, you will want to know why and what alternative recommendations the Director or Vice President will suggest to resolve that particular problem.

## **MONITORING OF IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

Committee monitoring is essential for the following reasons:

- To see that the recommendations are implemented;
- To evaluate that the recommendations are accomplishing what they were supposed to do;
- To assess if there are any unintended consequences, and,
- Whether further changes, if any, are needed.

## **SETTING UP AN EVALUATION OR MONITORING PROCESS**

Depending on the complexity of a resolution or recommendation, the process can vary from a comprehensive review by a committee to simply gathering some information from affected individuals and offices.

- Some subcommittee, new committee or office needs to be in charge of the monitoring process, with a specific individual being named.
- Information should be gathered from the implementing office as well as from those for whom the policy or program was designed to benefit.

## **SOME ODDS AND ENDS:**

- If used in your organization, learn Robert's Rules of Order. You don't have to know everything but you need a basic understanding of how motions are made, amended, tabled and voted on. Libraries often have good summaries of Robert's Rules. Knowing Robert's Rules can be important in the passage or rejection of a motion.

- **Be prepared to compromise. Compromises are often essential as a way for everyone to feel that they were listened to and to go forward without rancor. Sometimes it is a good idea to ask for more than what you want so that you can compromise more easily.**

***When controversial discussions arise:***

**When a group has discussed something for 20 minutes or more and can't come to closure, it often means that the group lacks critical information or is too emotional to make a decision. What to do?**

- **Assess whether it is a lack of information or too much emotional involvement.**
- **If you realize that information is lacking, you can raise it with the group, whether you are the chair or a member, such as, "It's hard for us to make a decision without knowing how much this will cost. How can we get this information [can the person who introduced the subject find this out, or do we need to set up a committee to obtain this information]?"**
- **If the group is too emotionally invested, it is time to table the discussion or else refer it to a sub-committee. Discussing something for longer than 20 minutes in a group is rarely productive. You'll notice that the same arguments will be raised, perhaps even more vehemently, individuals will become more entrenched in their positions, and no new information will be added.**

**FOR ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES**

- **Whenever you attend a meeting, observe and try to figure out the strategies other people are using and whether they are successful or not.**
- **Talk to others about what strategies they found to be successful in working with committees or departments.**
- **If you are trying to get something through a committee or through the department, talk to appropriate members of the group as well as other knowledgeable people for advice on the best strategy.**

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