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Beware committees

TN58 Training Notes series: Structures

Committees can seriously damage your church's health. They can take up hours of time, imprison you in maintenance-mode and ensure every discussion is duplicated. Be warned!

But if you believe that planning and decision-making should be done in a collaborative style, you need some form of 'committee structure'. These notes are designed to help you reap the benefits while avoiding the pitfalls.

It assumes that a decision-making body (such as a Council, Eldership, PCC, Church Meeting, Kirk Session) sets up small sub-groups for certain areas of work. Here are 12 principles to follow. Tick any where you feel you do particularly well; cross those where you think you may need to do some work.

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☐ 1: **Avoid the word!**

In most people's minds, committees sit on their backsides and talk. Except, of course, for the 'Standing Committee'….. The word 'committee' communicates all kinds of unhelpful messages, so avoid it like the plague. Anything is better: Planning Groups, Working Groups, Mission Groups, Action Teams. Never, ever have a 'General Purposes Committee' because it will always find plenty of general purposes to discuss. Think of a better title for the 'Standing Committee' if you can.

☐ 2: **Define the overall purpose**

That is, the purpose of all the groups together. If you cannot do this easily, you don't need the groups. The purpose answers the question 'Why?' and starts 'So that…'. It ought to be something to do with collaborative planning, leading to clear decisions, leading to definite action. Action may mean a clear recommendation to a different and

executive body. But the groups exist to move you forward in God's will and should be seen in the context of your church's vision.

Never set up new groups without seeing them as part of the collective of all the groups. Then they all have to sign up to the agreed purpose.

3: **Treasure simplicity**

It can be helpful to define a list of principles for all the groups; if you want the technical word, it's 'values'. But whatever you set needs checking on regularly or the groups will default to talk-shops which can be a waste of valuable time.

One worthwhile principle would be 'simplicity'. The structure must never breed bureaucracy or keep people in church-based meetings when they ought to be acting as salt and light in the world. Decision-making should be carried out within agreed guidelines but without unnecessary baggage. Have as few groups as possible. Avoid turgid sets of minutes; instead list decisions taken on one side of A4 with actions.

4: **Keep numbers small**

Groups should be few in number (see 3 above) and small in size. Three people is quite big enough for some groups. Five or six might be a maximum. Large groups are there for safety; small groups take risks. Prune the groups if they start to expand.

On the other hand an outsider on a group can be a bonus. If the 'children's group' is just made up of the leaders, it may lack freshness in thought. An awkward parent might add value.

If some archaic rule says the Minister is on every group, he or she should be selective. By all means be on call to all groups but stick with the Leadership Team.

5: **Structure by church purpose**

Most churches have groups based on activities or groups of people in the church. But there may be better structures to follow. How about one group for everything to do with the church's responsibility to grow in relationship with God, one for community life, and a third for reaching out into and serving the world. Then you might need an administrative group for finance and resources and a vision team to discern God's direction for the church.

This is actually the basic structure of the Church Health Review – see the Health-checks section of this site. See also Training Notes TN136, *Restructure your committees.* Once you need a group for each activity, groups proliferate. That is what to avoid.

6: **Give each group clear powers**

The groups must know exactly what they can and cannot do. If they can take decisions, up to what level or limit? When can they get on with the job and when do they need permission? It is vital that both group members and the overseeing Council or Diaconate know where the boundaries lie.

An annual report back to that Council will be wise, but as a list of decisions taken and reasons, not a long descriptive piece. Note also No. 12 below.

☐ 7: **Build teams**

A few friends don't necessarily make for an effective group. Try to get a mix of doers, thinkers, carers and planners, of old hands and newcomers, of men and women, of different ages. Get people with different perspectives, provide they all sign up to the overall purpose and principles.

Then seek to build a team. Train everyone in what teams are and how they can work effectively. Training Notes TN41 on this website could be a starting point.

☐ 8: **Keep decisions close to action**

Make sure the groups are involved in the action. They should, in general, be populated by people who actually do whatever it is the group is responsible for. An evangelism group should be passionate about and up to their eyes in outreach.

Membership of a group should never be seen as a matter of status or reward for long service in the church. Groups are for your workers, not your middle-managers.

☐ 9: **Work outside meetings**

The groups will need to meet from time to time, but much of their activity needs to take place in between meetings: one-to-one discussions, text messages and email, a quick get-together for ten minutes after church on Sunday. The groups exist 24/7, not just in their meetings. They should move fast, with a minimum of formality.

When a group does come together it should pray, plan, spark each other off, discuss and decide – and then get on with the job. Each group should be so much more than the sum of its meetings.

☐ 10: **Trust the groups**

One of the most common failings in any decision-making structure is the inability of the higher group (Church Council or whatever) to trust decisions that have been made. So the rule should be that a recommendation can be questioned (or sent back), but the Council or whatever should never repeat the discussion the group has already had.

The higher body's job is to take a whole-church view of the issue, which may mean having to prioritise budget requests. The group's job is to be passionate about its speciality. The two bodies should complement each other. But, sadly, too often there are power struggles and suspicion.

Churches have lived on safety for too long: it's time to take risks in a changing world.

☐ 11: **Set self-destruct dates**

If you set up a special group for anything, give it a limited life – and don't permit any idea of reincarnation. The church weekend away group disappears one month after the weekend takes place. If people on the Church Council say you have done a good job and please stay on to plan the next weekend, stand up to this bullying by quoting your self-destruct date and disband forthwith.

The longer a group exists the harder it is to close it down. If self-destruct is the norm, you have a more vibrant structure.

12: **Review regularly**

Once a year spend a short time reviewing all the groups. How are they working? What has been the output (in terms of action) compared with the input (effort)? Which groups need to die, which need pruning back in terms of membership? Is the structure serving the church's vision or is it becoming heavy-weight? You might use these notes as a format.

It might be worth giving one person responsibility for ensuring that the structure does work well. If no one is responsible, the groups easily stagnate.

Check out any of the 12 you have put a cross against and think through how the idea expressed might work out in practice in your church. But don't set up a committee to do this....