

# There's a Committee for That!

by Martha Whitman

*Committees have great potential for adding value to the board, because it's easier for a small group than a large group to explore an issue in detail and to gain expertise on it.*

As the governing body of the cooperative, the board must not only make sure all is well in the present but also to look ahead and align the co-op's values with the future. It's a big job requiring time and attention. It simply can't be accomplished solely at regular board meetings. The solution? Yup, you guessed it: committees. But only if you set them up to succeed. Done well, committees can turn a board from good to great. However, an ill-conceived or poorly managed committee can send the board down the proverbial rabbit hole. The goal is to add value to the board, and with good structure.

The starting point is to acknowledge that board committees exist to serve the board. If you currently have a committee serving another function, reconsider its proper place within the organization. It could very well be addressing operational issues and thus belong under the guidance of the general manager. Furthermore, resist the impulse to respond to an issue by automatically forming a committee. First, consider whether the issue is really board business. Even if it is, does it make more sense to assign a task to a specific person than send it to a committee? If ultimately the board decides it would benefit from a committee that can work on an issue in more depth, the first step is to create a clear committee charter, which the board should approve.

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This article is excerpted from Issue #14 of the [LEADer](#) (Leadership Education and Development newsletter), published in winter 2012. The topic of this issue was the role and potential of board committees with other articles about helping committees be effective, types of committees that boards find useful, the executive committee, as well ideas for a member engagement committee. The study guide features a template for a committee charter. Find the [full issue here](#).



## There's a Committee for That!

A committee charter spells out, among other things, the committee's purpose. To support board holism, always have a board member chair the committee. Sharing the workload is good, so you'll want more than one board member on the committee. But to keep the line of accountability clear, only one director should chair the committee. To build leadership skills, you can rotate the chair role, but that makes sense only with standing committees; ad hoc committees shouldn't be around long enough for that approach to be effective or appropriate.

Committees have great potential for adding value to the board, because it's easier for a small group than a large group to explore an issue in detail and to gain expertise on it. Committee meetings tend to offer a less formal setting than regular board meetings, which makes it easier to explore different perspectives. You also have freedom to involve a variety of outside people in the committee's work, tapping into an array of expertise and diversity. A well-written committee charter is a valuable tool for harnessing people and

their talent. A charter will help keep the committee focused on the specific task at hand while fostering a spirit of exploration for best outcomes.

There are also side benefits to committee work. First and foremost, you want the committee to meet its purpose and complete its assigned task. But beyond that, committees can provide other benefits to the co-op. They are an excellent mechanism for member participation, often helping create a pool of well-qualified board candidates. Co-op members can develop leadership and team-building skills on committees, gain a better understanding of the board's role, and learn to be effective directors. Committees are also an excellent option for retiring directors who still want to contribute to the board. It's a win-win situation: the outgoing director still participates but without the full load of director responsibilities; the board doesn't lose that member's wisdom and experience.

As wonderful as committees can be, it's important to respect members' time and energy.

Be mindful of the resources a committee consumes—not just member resources but co-op staff resources as well. In terms of the number of committees, less is more. Determine how many standing committees you really need and periodically review their charters to determine if they are still relevant. Be cautious before creating an ad hoc committee; there might be a simpler way to go. Limit the life of an ad hoc committee; avoid it dragging on too long. Always respect a committee's findings or recommendations. Don't waste a committee's time by rehashing all its work or setting it aside without rendering a decision.

Ideally, a committee should be engaged and productive. If that doesn't describe your committee, it's time to go back to the drawing board. If you think there's a problem, chances are others do too, and they'll welcome the opportunity to set the committee back on course. When well designed and effectively operating, committees can attract co-op members eager to join in and participate, and the co-op will be stronger for it.

