

DEPARTMENT MEETINGS DON'T HAVE TO HURT

A sort of painless & fairly easy way to establish committees & host meetings.

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An engaged workforce is essential to a successful fire department. To facilitate interaction, many fire departments establish committees, task forces or teams that are responsible for different projects, such as specifying new apparatus, reviewing safety standards, writing SOPs, and developing training and curriculum. We all have heard stories about committee meetings devolving into episodes of the “Jerry Springer Show.” Things usually go awry when committee members can’t find common ground or when they misunderstand the parameters of their group or project.

When I began my first fire chief job, the department had many established committees. When I asked about the committees’ parameters and how meetings were structured, someone handed me “Roberts Rules of Order,” a 200-plus-page guide for conducting meetings and making decisions as a group. I don’t know about you, but I think a fat book of rules first published in the 1800s contradicts the free-flowing nature of genuine productivity and creative brainstorming. Of course, there is a place for parliamentary procedures, but a fire department conference room is not one of them.

We can help ensure efficient, effective groups (and meetings!) by setting everyone up for success from the start. Doing so increases the overall sat-

isfaction of committee members as well as the department as a whole. With a little planning and forethought, it's a relatively straightforward process. The nine steps that follow can help you establish solid working groups and effectively manage meetings.



1) Have a Mission

When establishing a committee, develop a clear mission and detail the committee's specific responsibilities. If your department has several committees, a well-defined purpose for each will keep everyone in their lane. When dealing with large groups, it is not unusual to have individual agendas creep to the surface. Establishing clear parameters helps prevent overreaching. For example, the Relations Committee is one of the standing committees we have at the Minnetonka Fire Department (MFD). It differs from a union or other worker-representation group in that its mission is to ensure smooth relations between department administration and the line firefighters. The committee includes a firefighter (non-officer) from each fire station, the fire chief and the assistant city manager, which allows our workers to have direct, unfettered access to the department's administration and city leadership. Tapping into thoughts and ideas from all levels of an organization only serves to make it stronger. We make it clear that this committee does not exist to usurp the chain of command regarding operational issues; it exists only to improve workplace relationships.

2) Select a Chairperson

It's essential to have a chairperson who sets realistic expectations, listens to members and holds everyone accountable for their assignments and actions. In my experience, a good chairperson has the following attributes:

- ✓ Excellent communication skills (clear and succinct)
- ✓ Sensitive to members' feelings
- ✓ Objective and impartial
- ✓ Punctual (starts and finishes meetings on time)
- ✓ Approachable
- ✓ Tactful
- ✓ Knows a lot about the group's specific subject/mission
- ✓ Possesses a clear understanding of the organization

Name	Use	Purpose	Examples	Advantages
Standing Committee	To address a recurring need within an organization	Give advice, make decisions or recommendations	Safety or equipment committee	Organizational memory, development of expertise
Ad Hoc Committee	To address short-term, non-recurring tasks or needs	Make recommendations or accomplish a specific objective	Plan a special event (e.g., department anniversary)	Short-term commitment
Task Force	To address a complex issue or project	Make complex and consequential recommendations	Redesign apparatus pump panels	Temporary but of major importance
Project Team	To accomplish a major, focused task (not simply make recommendations)	Assure that adequate talent and time are devoted to task	Build a new headquarters fire station	Focuses talent & energy on important deliverables

3) Identify Members

Asking for volunteers and interested parties is usually better than hand-picking committee members, although there are occasions when hand-picking may be necessary, such as when subject-matter experts will prove essential to a committee's success. Note: It's always a good idea to have alternate members who can quickly step in if a primary member cannot attend a meeting.

For a committee to have any legitimacy, it requires members with opposing viewpoints. I also like to make sure I have representation from all corners of the department, which means members of varying seniority and rank and from different stations and shifts. Committees should be as diverse as your department, especially if the committee's decisions will affect any minorities within the department. Example: My department recently had a committee that examined the use of gender-neutral bathrooms in new fire stations. Having female members represented was essential to ensuring this change would be acceptable to all of our firefighters (and it was).

Norms of Behavior

Our meetings will exist as a forum to:

- Represent and seek out ideas and concerns
- Improve productivity, job quality, job satisfaction and communication
- Provide excellence in service as defined by the internal and external customers we serve
- Support a problem-solving process using ingenuity, imagination and creativity
- Support the overall planning process of the organization
- Support our organizational goals
- Support the shared values of the city

Setting goals, expectations and ground rules regarding how we will interact as a committee will make the group more productive.

The norms of behavior:

- Prompt start and finish times
- Come prepared
- Stick to the issues—avoid personalities
- Emphasize the positive
- Respect others opinions and ideas
- Look at issues from all sides
- Complete honesty without fear of reprisal
- Support each other
- Be willing to take risks
- Take turns
- Be patient
- Ask for clarification
- Beware of humor that can be taken personally
- Be nice

—J.V.

4) Set Expectations

As a boss, you should set clear and realistic expectations for the group. Be specific about what you expect them to accomplish (e.g., recommendations for new hose loads) and give the group an estimate of how long it should take them to achieve their goal. Setting parameters for the scope of the committee's responsibilities keeps everyone focused and prevents members from drifting beyond their wheelhouse.

5) Name It!

Different workgroups have different purposes and should have different names. The chart above defines those differences and can help you

choose a committee type based on the group's goals, objectives and structure. Members within your department should be somewhat familiar with committee names and types, the committee's objective and the time commitment involved.

6) Set Meeting Agendas

Agendas are a transparent way to organize meetings, and they allow participants to understand what they will discuss. Setting a deadline for agenda items at least 24 hours before a meeting enables the chairperson to inform principal players what might be asked of them, which prevents gotcha moments where someone feels unprepared. Detailed agendas can also thwart grandstanding and prevent subgroups from hijacking the meeting. Of course, this only works if everyone sticks to the plan, and the chairperson must keep everyone on track.

7) Require Timely Communication

Any group or committee should provide regular progress reports and final recommendations to the chief or other groups that will validate any final recommendations. Transparency helps to squash rumors before they start and keeps department members informed of the group's processes.



Don't let meetings spiral into chaos. Create ground rules that define what behaviors will and won't be tolerated.

8) Establish Ground Rules for Conduct

It is smart to outline expectations for each working group at the first meeting. Managing expectations is essential when setting up any committee, task force or project team. Members of the MFD's Relations Committee (mentioned previously) created "The Norms of Behavior" to ensure productivity and to establish mutual goals for team members (see above). Often, others

in your organization need to be heard and value the opportunity to express their concerns and ideas. As a committee chair, understanding these things is essential. It is also important for all participants to understand that just because an idea is discussed does not mean it will be adopted. Committee members must support each other and cultivate an environment where it is safe to talk and share ideas, even when people disagree.

9) Have Fun

Not all topics are fun, but that should not prevent meetings from being enjoyable. Make sure you have a comfortable, quiet space to gather. Offer refreshments (food is a great motivator!) and hold some meetings just to celebrate milestones. You want participants to look forward to these get-togethers, and groups with a dour spirit won't be as productive. Setting goals and expectations and outlining ground rules will make any group more productive.

I hope these tips will help you organize your next get-together and keep your members looking forward to, rather than dreading, their next committee meeting. When people look forward to being part of a team or task force, they are more likely to bring their most creative ideas to the table, and innovative thinking keeps a fire department moving forward. **BS**



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