

## Committees

Can't make a decision, form a committee. That's how management works. There, I saved you from taking 18-24 months off to get your MBA. What do you think of committees? Is this a good way to build consensus? Get the collective wisdom of the best and brightest? In a group setting, do you think the best and the brightest will speak up and offer a controversial suggestion? Or do you think that the smart people on the committee will know it is best to keep their mouths shut and let some other poor slob make fools of themselves?

What is a committee? One comic offered up the following. A committee is a group of individuals who can do nothing, but collectively make sure that nothing can be done. It has been noted that there are no statues of committees. Or a committee is a cul de sac down which ideas are lured and quietly strangled. Perhaps you've heard that a committee is a group of the unwilling who are unfit to do anything other than the unnecessary.

There is much to dislike about committees given the above sentiments. But let us be optimistic about our subject and look at the positives. We know that when there are complex problems that need to be solved, it is good to get a variety of inputs so that a best option can be selected by interested parties. I say "a" best option rather than "the" best option as there are often equally good choices before the committee and the job is to select one. So, our committee needs the best available minds to produce the wisest choice. But in a committee, who is the smartest guy in the room? No one raises their hand, but everyone thinks it's them. How on earth are these people going to have a frank discussion of the relevant issues if they feel that way? And you just know they feel that way.

Suppose we had a committee of famous scientists gather to determine the speed of light. Let's have Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein for starters and maybe 10 other similarly famous people from the world of physics on our committee. Do you think Einstein would try to explain his theories of special and general relativity to Newton, or would he surmise that this committee isn't up to his standards and just sit quietly thinking how foolish the rest of the committee is? Let them come up with whatever they want, and he'll just go back to Princeton and do his own thing. Might each of our prima donnas do likewise and the committee fail to reach a conclusion? Or might a majority of lesser minds have some number in mind for the speed of light and maybe those folks have enough numbers to outvote the brighter minds who know they are wrong. Now our committee will report out a finding, but it will just be the old garbage in, garbage out.

My example is offered up to suggest why the brightest people on a committee may not carry the day. They may not engage. They might just get outvoted by a block of like-minded committee members. Who put this committee together and did they stack the deck so that a predetermined outcome would occur? Do you think that sort of thing doesn't happen? It happens all the time.

Here's an example. A college dean has a faculty member he/she likes and wants to be promoted. This faculty member is an excellent teacher, but he/she hasn't published much of anything. The standing committee on promotions under values teaching and overvalues publication. So, the dean appoints new members to the promotions committee. Enough to have a working majority of committee members who value teaching above publishing. The candidate isn't put up for promotion until those new committee members are seated. The outcome is predetermined by just letting the committee do its work. The dean justifies his addition of new members on the promotions committee as an effort to be more inclusive of a diverse faculty.

A sensitive topic is in need of a decision. A CEO must decide whether to move the home office to one of two different locations. One is more central to the business and the other closer to the largest customer. A committee is appointed to make a recommendation. At this point, you should be thinking that the CEO is going to pick people for this committee who will give him the choice he privately wants and provide cover should there be major objections from some in the company or if the relocation causes a loss of business. The committee members will likely know that the hot potato has been passed to them and they will clam up if they are smart. They will deadlock or hedge. Or they may be ignorant enough to believe they are making the decision when the CEO determined the outcome by whom he placed on the committee. Oh, the games people play.

Perhaps you can tell that I don't think much of committees as the way to get the best outcomes. If you still are on the fence about that, I will point out that our Congress does its work by breaking up into committees. If you want the best advice from a group of experts, you call them in individually and ask for their input or ideas. That way you let them be the "smartest guy in the room" for your one-on-one session. If you are a wise leader of your organization, you will know who the thought leaders are, and you can solicit their advice privately. If you want to just have someone to scapegoat a difficult decision, you are a gutless wonder in my book. If you really don't know what is best, get as diverse an input as possible and do your job.

I will leave you with something to ponder. Orthodoxy in religion is arrived at by committee. They are called church councils or synods, but it is a committee. All the dynamics I've cited above are in play in those gatherings. Was the deck stacked for a specific outcome? Were the best and brightest free to speak of alternative points of view or were they covered into silence? Did those in a minority, if present at all, know that they would be outvoted? Did we end up with the best outcome? Is that why there are so many sects? Do too many cooks spoil the stew?

Submitted by Robert Rietschel, April 12, 2023

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