

# How To Staff a Committee

Is staffing a committee more like herding cats or turtles? Actually it's more like "Dancing with the Stars."

An important skill for nonprofit managers is knowing how to support a committee of volunteers, such as an Advisory Committee, a Board Finance Committee, or a Coalition.

Staff at many levels support your volunteer committees. An administrative assistant may support a committee for a spring fundraiser. Or, the CFO may support the board finance committee. And, of course, the executive director supports the board.

When supporting a committee, the most seductive trap for a staff person is to take over. After all, you probably know more than many committee members and you may feel frustrated with their inconsistent participation.

The crucial concept to remember is that the goal is not simply to get through the agenda, but to support the empowerment and development of the committee.

Use these tips to help you "lead from below."

## 1 Learn about your committee members and stay up-to-date on their activities.

- ▼ Set a Google Alert ([www.google.com/alerts](http://www.google.com/alerts)) on each member and follow them on Twitter. Whether they're getting a PTA award or their child graduated from high school, you'll want to know. If it sparks a question you can ask, even better.
- ▼ Ask your manager to brief you on each committee member. What should you try to bring out (or avoid) in each person?
- ▼ Learn how they like to be contacted: Email? Phone? If there are printed materials, where should you mail them?

## 2 Manage the logistics perfectly.

- ▼ For in-person meetings, send the agenda, location, directions, contact

information, and discussion materials with adequate advance time.

- ▼ Follow the committee chair's lead on how to manage documents, and let committee members know you are using that guidance: "At Stephanie's suggestion, board materials will be emailed in a single pdf a week ahead of meetings. We will not have hard copies at the meeting unless you specifically request them beforehand."
- ▼ Remember, committee members often don't directly observe the organization's work, so what they do observe becomes magnified in importance. If the staff doesn't copy things properly, for example, a committee

member might wonder, "Can I trust them to work properly with the teenagers that we serve?"

- ▼ Have appropriate refreshments like fruit, cheese, and crackers. Don't make them too skimpy, too lavish, or hard to eat. Ask your committee chair for suggestions.

**3 Help the chair to lead the committee effectively.** Here are examples of some important ways to do that.

- ▼ Ask the committee chair if she'd like you to prepare draft agendas for her review, or if she wants you to do the first draft.
- ▼ Ideally, the chair should author and send communications to the committee, but you can also write memos for her signature (after her review) and pass them along: "I'm sending along this recap of responsibilities from Chris."
- ▼ Ask your manager what records the board or bylaws require for this particular committee's meetings. If you take minutes or notes, ask the chair what level of detail she wants, and to give you feedback on drafts.
- ▼ Develop a rolling, year-long calendar for you and the committee chair. For a board finance committee, this might include: (a) In April: an in-person meeting to review 1<sup>st</sup> quarter financial statements and give guidance to staff as appropriate; (b) In May: a conference call to discuss drafts of the audit and

management letter [if there is one]; and (c) In June: an in-person meeting to review the financial procedures manual and to discuss financial policies such as investments, cash management, operating resources and banking relationships.

**4 Be professional during the meeting.** A few tips on how to do this include:

- ▼ Sit at the table at the opposite end of the committee chair, unless she asks you to sit next to her.
- ▼ If taking notes, don't keep your head down; pay attention to the conversation. Use body language to show you are attentive, such as nodding or smiling at a speaker who has made a funny comment. If you look at your computer or notebook the whole time, it may look like you're answering email or doodling.
- ▼ Resist the temptation to jump in when there's a question or problem. For instance, if the committee chair is not yet on a conference call, ask those present what they'd like to do. If no one replies, you might say, "Heather, perhaps you could chair this conference call until Brad gets here?"

Remember, your job is to empower and support the committee doing its job, not to do it for them.

**5 Follow up fast.** That day or the next, send a quick email to the committee chair pointing out something positive about the meeting. For example: "That was a good discussion yesterday. I'm writing up the notes. Okay if I send them out next week?"

**6 Maintain clear job boundaries at all times.** The committee is generally not your main supervisor and does not control your time. If the committee or chair asks you to take on a large piece of work, remind them, "I'll need to check with my boss to make sure it's okay for me to do this given my other responsibilities."

**7 Be an advocate for your committee and its volunteer members.** If a volunteer recognition

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*You can't compensate for a weak committee or weak chair by doing the work for them.*

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event is coming up, be sure your committee members are invited. Commend their performance to your manager and see if he would ask the board chair to praise them as well.

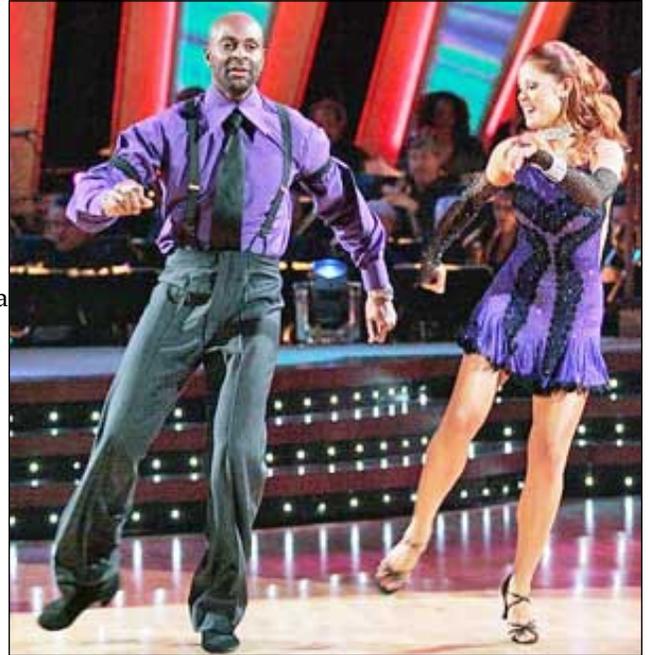
**8 Think “Dancing with the Stars.”** This popular show pairs a professional dancer with a celebrity who is typically not very good at dancing. The professional dancer fails if he or she tries to compensate for the amateur dancer by dancing twice as well. Instead, the couple that wins must have a routine that makes the most of the amateur’s ability, with the professional supporting that ability.

In other words, you can’t compensate for a weak committee or weak chair by doing the work

for them. Instead, you may need talk with your manager about asking the board chair to change the leadership of the committee or about recruiting different members for it. ■

– Jan Masaoka

*Jan Masaoka is publisher of Blue Avocado. She has staffed many committees and learned much from seeing good leadership. She has also taken a lot of aspirin. She is a fan of footballer Jerry Rice, seen right on “Dancing with the Stars.”*



“Dancing with the Stars”

<http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/extra-mustard/photos/1302/sports-figures-on-dancing-with-the-stars>

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