



## American Water Works Association

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## How to Organize and Manage a Successful Section Committee

When something doesn't work, how often have you heard "Oh, it must have been designed by a committee?"

Or have you heard "Our committee started with two choices and we narrowed them down to eight?" Milton Berle said, "A committee is a group that keeps minutes and wastes hours."

Committees aren't born bad or good. Their success in accomplishing objectives depends on many factors. Committees must be given a good start, nurtured along the way, and given the right amount of independence.

This guide lists specific steps to help establish and maintain successful section committees.

### Create a Committee or Assign a Task?

The first step is to determine whether or not a committee should be formed. Answer these questions before forming a committee: Is this committee really necessary? Can we describe exactly what we want the committee to accomplish? A section may want to form a committee if the goal or result requires a consensus or broad support.

Assigning tasks is an alternative to creating a committee. Many members have busy schedules and may find it easier to commit to a task that will take one month or two rather than a three-year committee appointment. An individual who has been assigned a task also has the freedom to make a quick decision. Decisions made by committees often take much more time. A rule of thumb: don't use a committee if one person can make the decision or accomplish the task.

### Select Committee Type

Should you find that a committee is needed, the type of committee should be determined. Committees are broadly classified in two categories standing and special. Standing committees have ongoing responsibilities. Special or ad hoc committees are

formed for specific short-term tasks and are disbanded after accomplishing their objectives.

### Define the Purpose

Without a defined purpose, a committee may well be on the road to failure. To prevent this the first job of a committee is to produce its mission statement and goals for board review. Another option is to have the section board develop these. If the section has a strategic plan, developing the committee mission and goals will be relatively easy. The board already will have developed objectives for section growth and development. Committee goals should always support the section's strategic plan.

The committee and the board should reach agreement on the committee's function. The mission and goals should be defined precisely so that the board and the committee itself can evaluate progress.

A mission statement and goals best define a committee's purpose. The mission statement concisely sets forth why the committee exists and should be based on the section's strategic plan. For example, the mission of the AWWA Diversity Committee states:

To assist AWWA in creating a diverse membership and establishing an organizational environment that recognizes, encourages, celebrates, and effectively utilizes each individual member's talents.

When a committee bogs down or struggles to find a focus, its mission statement should help to steer it back in the right direction.

Once the mission statement is established, specific goals should be developed. For the AWWA Diversity Committee, the goals are

- To review the AWWA staff Diversity Plan and its implementation, reporting annually to the Executive Director and Executive Committee
- To encourage and assist sections in establishing section diversity programs that promote increased participation of minorities, women, and other protected groups in section activities.

- To encourage and promote active diversity programs among the organization members of the Association, i.e., utilities, manufacturers, consultants, and engineers.
- To encourage and assist organization members in the recruitment of minorities, women, and other protected groups as active participants in the Association.
- To inform the Association membership of the progress and accomplishments of the diversity program.

Both the committee and the board should review the committee's mission statement and goals regularly to ensure they reflect current section needs. Adjustments should be made if necessary.

### **Committee Functions**

AWWA section committees generally perform the following functions:

- Administrative responsibilities such as finance, bylaws, membership, strategic planning, and diversity
- Program activities such as public information, government affairs, conservation, safety, education, and research
- Examining issues or making recommendations on topics such as the state-level SDWA implementation or section restructuring
- Liaison duties that promote cooperative relations with other associations or government agencies such as small system compliance support committees or water utility councils.

### **Formation**

The broadest committee guidelines can be established in section bylaws. However, bylaws should give authorization to the section board or chair to form committees as needed, rather than specifying each and every committee. Committees may form subcommittees as needed, and all recommendations in this guide apply equally to subcommittees.

### **Size**

Keep the size of the committee small, from five to seven members, if prompt action is required or if the committee provides administrative direction.

Larger committees, from nine to 15 members, allow more viewpoints to be heard. This is especially important for strategic planning committees. Allow for all segments of the section (large, medium, and small utilities; consultants; operators; and manufacturers, etc.) to be represented. When

establishing committee membership, contact new members, women, and minorities, as well as established members. Many members who have not yet been involved are waiting to be asked to serve on committees. Adding these members to committees will add a new dimension that will enhance most committee actions. However, before asking anyone to serve, determine the person's interest and availability.

### **Selection of the Committee Chair**

The chair selection process is established by section bylaws, and the chair is usually selected by the board of trustees. The person who is most expert in a given subject doesn't always make the best chair. Matching the right committee chair to the committee will be easier after considering the following objective and subjective leadership qualities:

#### **Objective**

- Interest in the section – does this person attend meetings, volunteer service, and make other contributions?
- Past experiences – has this person shown good business sense? Served on committees before? Chaired a committee before?
- Length of membership – how long has this individual been a member?

#### **Subjective**

- Vision and initiative – does this person have the ability to forgo his or her own views to consider what's best for the section? Can the individual initiate and follow through?
- Leadership – has this person demonstrated leadership qualities?
- Open mind – is this person willing to consider alternative solutions?
- Knowledge – does this person possess knowledge of the section and AWWA?
- Listening – will the candidate listen to all views and respond to the needs of the committee?

The ultimate test of leadership is how well the chair gets the job done.

After committee chairs are selected, the board should have a chair orientation session. During this session, the board should

- Conduct a committee management training.
- Emphasize the importance of the position – committee members will look for ideas, leadership, and support from the chair.

- Fully explain the duties and responsibilities.
- Review the committee's mission and objectives.
- Review and establish the bounds of committee activity and authority.
- Review the section bylaws, policies, practices, and procedures.
- Review past accomplishments and current work of the committee.
- Review the assignments of committee members.
- Review the criteria used for selecting new committee members.
- Identify available board, section staff, and AWWA staff assistance.

### **Responsibilities of the Committee Chair**

The committee chair must be an excellent meeting manager. In order to accomplish this, the chair must understand the committee's mission and objectives, plan meetings, resolve conflicts, get the committee members to do their homework, and communicate effectively. Committee members are volunteers with many other responsibilities. They are more willing to participate if meetings don't always drag on through the evening hours after work. The chair must also guide the committee to consensus.

In addition, a good chair should

- Prepare an agenda that realistically fits in the meeting time available.
- Make sure everyone is introduced.
- Involve as many members as possible in discussion by soliciting opinions and experiences.
- Summarize major points or decisions from time to time.
- Keep discussions directed to the subject.
- Revert to the facts if conflicts can't be resolved.
- Maintain objectivity.
- Praise members and acknowledge their contributions.
- Listen.

Summarizing action items and assignments at the end of the meeting will ensure committee members know what and when action is due. The committee chair should be responsible for communicating with the section board. The chair should inform committee members of board action and also supply the board with committee member recommendations.

Committee chair terms should be limited to give the chair a much-needed break and also to create leadership opportunities for other members.

### **Selection of Committee Members**

When selecting committee members, consider individuals' interest in serving on the committee, their level of experience, and professional reputation. Interest level will give you an idea of the commitment of an individual, while experience will indicate whether the individual knows what's expected and is willing to deliver. In some cases, for example research, professional reputation is also important.

Don't be afraid to select members with differing opinions. Dealing with differences in the committee setting is often more effective than in an open debate. Remember, the chair is charged with guiding the committee to consensus.

Some other hints: As much as possible, select a diverse representation from your section. This will help ensure that the needs of your whole membership will be well represented. To provide continuity, stagger the terms of the committee members. New committee members with fresh innovative ideas are always a welcome addition. Keep in mind, though, that you don't have to replace interested and active committee members for the sake of new faces. Active committees usually try new ideas and approaches rather than relying on last year's ideas.

Committee chairs should conduct an orientation for new members similar to the one the chair received from the board. This orientation includes letting the new member know that a good committee member should

- Be willing and able to give the necessary time to attend meetings and perform duties.
- Get acquainted with the chair and other members.
- Thoroughly review the agenda and background material before meetings.
- Participate in discussions.
- Respect others viewpoints.
- Be objective.
- Think in terms of the broad welfare of the group, rather than personal interests.
- Stay on the subject.
- Ask for clarification on any point not understood.
- Accept and follow through on assignments.

A formal absenteeism policy is a good idea for all section committees. This policy should state that after a number of unexplained absences, a committee member's position automatically becomes open. This policy should be explained during the committee member orientation. Be sure all committee members understand it. Make sure to send a letter stating this policy to members who have vacated their positions because of their absences. Otherwise, you may be surprised to see them at a future meeting.

## **Committee Activity**

As mentioned earlier, the committee's mission and goals should be based on the section's strategic plan or board direction. All committee activity should relate to the mission and goals commonly agreed on by the committee and board. Once the committee has developed an action plan, the board should be informed of the proposed activities to garner support. Communication is essential to the committee's successful execution of its action plan.

Use the following steps to develop an action plan:

1. Define specific objectives in a planning session. For example, an objective of the section membership committee might be to recruit 20 new utilities this year. Remember that objectives should be based on the goals listed in your section's strategic plan and your committee's mission and goals.
2. Analyze the objective – brainstorm. For example, a membership committee might consider the following questions: What's involved in recruiting a utility? What are the membership benefits for utilities? Why do utilities decide to join AWWA? Who actually makes the decision in a utility to become a member? What does it cost to join? Is 20 a realistic number?
3. Gather facts. In addition to answering the questions in step 2, find out how many utilities in the section aren't AWWA members, their sizes and locations.
4. Review the committee's need for outside assistance. Determine what assistance the Association can provide, such as brochures, benefit lists, mailing lists, and tips on recruitment. Should other committees or the general section membership be involved in the activity? Should a special brochure describing the section's unique benefits be produced? What have other sections or

organizations done to successfully recruit members?

5. Explore possibilities. Should utilities of a certain size or in a particular geographic area be targeted? Should the recruiting drive begin with a direct mail campaign, telephone calls, or personal visits? Would it be better if utilities were involved in activities before they are invited to join?
6. Create an Action Plan. Reach a consensus on tasks that should be undertaken.
7. Assign responsibility. Divide the tasks among the members and make sure the responsibilities are defined.
8. Set timelines. This action is essential to accomplishing tasks.
9. Take action.
10. Evaluate results. Is the action plan working? If not, go back to step 2 and evaluate where and how the plan went off the track.

## **Meeting Preparation**

Effective committee meetings don't just happen; they are carefully planned. As well as running the meeting itself, the chair is responsible to make sure all the following items have been covered:

1. Agenda. The chair prepares the agenda with input from the committee members. Member input increases attendance and participation. Allocate sufficient time for each topic on the agenda. On the written agenda include the anticipated starting times for every third or fourth topic or group of related items. If the agenda is long, divide it into sections, and give each a starting and ending time. Items not on the agenda should be saved for the next meeting.
2. Time and place. Both time and place should be decided at the preceding meeting. Be sure to find a convenient location for all members or rotate the meetings among various locations in the sections. Alternatives to face-to-face meetings include telephone conference calls and Internet chat rooms. E-mail and fax are good alternatives for questions that need little discussion.
3. Committee notification. Send an agenda and supporting documents to members well in advance of the meeting via regular mail, fax, or

e-mail. Get in touch with members shortly before the meeting to verify attendance.

4. **Physical arrangements.** Be sure physical arrangements are suitable.
  - Is the meeting room private, quiet, comfortable, and accessible? It should be neither too large nor too small. Be sure to give exact directions to committee members. Post a sign outside the door of the meeting room.
  - What is the appropriate seating arrangement? Use an oval or round table, if possible, so all members are visible to each other. Are name badges or table signs necessary?
  - Are audiovisual and copying equipment or a flip chart needed?
  - Are refreshments or a meal required? Will coffee, tea, and water be available?

### ***Meeting Operations***

1. **Start and end the meeting on time.** Committee chairs should respect the volunteers' valuable time. Stick to the agenda and follow the time allotted to the agenda items.
2. **Introduce members and visitors.** Introduce members and visitors so you will not have committee members wondering who a visitor is and what relevance his or her visit has to the meeting.
3. **Meeting records.** A committee member should be assigned to take minutes. A tape recorder may be used to assist in the subsequent preparation of written minutes. The written minutes are the official record of the meeting. Minutes from the preceding meeting should be distributed within four weeks after the meeting. Clearly show action items and who is responsible. Send copies as required to other parties such as AWWA headquarters, the section newsletter editor, and the section board.
4. **Parliamentary procedure.** Robert's Rules of Order are helpful in maintaining proper procedure and meeting control. They need not be followed to the letter, but consistency is essential.
5. **Work through the agenda.** According to Robert's Rules of Order, agenda items should be handled in the following order:

- Announce the item.
- Ask for or give a report on the item.
- Allow discussion.
- Ask for motion.
- Ask for second to motion.
- Ask for any further discussion.
- Repeat the motion.
- Call for either a voice vote or a show of hands.
- Announce motion or adoption or failure.
- If the motion fails, call for a new motion and second. Generally, there should be no discussion until a new motion is made under this circumstance, although some discussion may be necessary to form a new motion.
- Repeat steps 4 through 10 until the item is resolved.
- Move to next item.

To help committees keep track of the agenda items, a worksheet is available from AWWA.

1. **Status reports.** Ask the committee members or subcommittee chairs to give status reports on their progress. This report can be given in writing or verbally.
2. **Summary.** Summarize the action items and due dates that have resulted from the meeting.
3. **Next meeting.** Establish a date and place for the next committee meeting.
4. **Adjournment.**

### ***Volunteer Recognition***

Nothing brings volunteers back more than their feeling that their work was valued and appreciated. That's why it is so important to recognize the contributions of volunteers. The section board should thank committee members for their efforts with personal letters, public recognition, a certificate of appreciation, more authority, or a "plum" assignment, and at committee and section meetings. This should be done throughout the year as projects or events are completed, or when committee members are leaving the committee.

### ***Resolving Problems With Committee Chairs***

If a chair is not performing up to expectations, the board must avoid being judgmental. The chair may have personal or professional problems, or simply may have many demands on his or her time. The lack

of performance may be temporary. Have a board-member talk honestly to the chair. Offer options such as help with the committee, a temporary leave from duties, or reassignment.

Situations such as an uncooperative or ineffective chair or a chair refusing to focus on the board approved mission and objectives may require action as drastic as removal by the board.

## ***Keeping Your Committee Viable and Productive***

To ensure your committees are running effectively, it is important to keep them free of “deadwood.” To maintain only vital, contributing members on a committee, take the following steps:

1. Make sure members know the purpose of the committee and what makes a good committee member.
2. Committee assignments should be clear, detailed, and specific. Break the project down into small pieces if the project is too burdensome. All available resources should be given to the committee members.
3. Periodic checkups or regular committee reports will keep committee members focused and productive.
4. Make sure interested volunteers are matched with the right committees. Use new member questionnaires to place volunteers on committees
5. At times, it may be necessary to address a performance issue with a committee member. If this occurs, it is important to minimize hard feelings. After all, this person is volunteering his or her time to the section and may be better prepared and willing to do so in the future. However, for the benefit of the committee, quick action is better than waiting until the person is rotated off the committee. Use the following suggestions to start this process:
  - Talk with the committee member. Are there outside issues affecting his or her committee involvement, e.g., pressures from a boss? Is the committee member truly interested in the activities of the committee? Can you help resolve any of the issues raised?
  - Be up-front with the individual; explain that because of absences, constant interruptions, and lack of follow-through, his or her appointment to this committee is not working.
  - An ineffective committee member might just be on the wrong committee. Tell this person another committee can use his or her

services. Sometimes the member will be as relieved to be free of the responsibility as you are to have the person off your committee.

- Before talking to the member, find a stand-alone project that he or she can handle. For example, if the member’s specialty is water quality, ask the member to take a sabbatical from the committee to work with small systems on SDWA.
- Make sure the term for committee membership is limited (three years is a good rule of thumb, but the term could be less).

## ***Ensuring Failure***

Unfortunately, it’s pretty easy to ruin the chance for committee success. Some of the “best” ways follow:

## **Ten Common Mistakes**

1. Be a poor leader. Make sure you don’t keep discussions on the subject, don’t answer questions, and don’t stick to the agenda.
2. Muddy the mission of the committee. Make sure committee members are unclear about objectives of the committee.
3. Constantly complain about everything; the room is too hot, the coffee is cold, you don’t like the setup of the room, and you hate being away from the office when there is a lot of work to do.
4. Mumble a lot and encourage others to mumble so that committee members can’t follow the topic.
5. Be sure to have one committee member who can dominate every topic since he or she is an expert in any and every field.
6. Make sure you have a temper and display it often.
7. Don’t ever initiate action or make suggestions. Reject committee members’ suggestions.
8. Don’t stay within the bounds of the committee’s scope. Talk about any topic that comes up, especially if it has nothing to do with the committee.
9. Don’t introduce committee members and guests. Committee members should spend time wondering why a new committee member or guest is attending the meeting.
10. Most important, don’t recognize committee efforts or compliment committee members.

## ***Ensure Success***

It takes more effort to increase the chance for committee success than to ruin it. But with practice, ensuring success becomes easier. Use the suggestions in this guide to help establish and operate successful

section committees. Remember, sections and section programs are only as successful as their committees and the members who volunteer.