

Nonprofit Strategies



SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

HOW TO MAKE ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETINGS WORTHWHILE

Barry VanderKelen

How can a **nonprofit** organization make advisory committee meetings a meaningful experience for members? Through thoughtful agenda planning, which can ensure they have a say in the group's operations and direction. I like to use the C-D-I model--consult, decide and inform -- in which each agenda item addresses one of these purposes. Consultation items pose questions or present problems that need the candid and honest feedback of the committee members. Decision items ask the advisory committee to recommend specific action. And information items update the members on the organization's progress, developments and plans. Organizations tend to include too many information items on their agendas. Consultation and decision items do more to deepen a committee member's sense of engagement with the organization. An advisory committee works best when the members can give their advice and are assured that the organization's leaders hear and understand.

There is goodwill among the members who sincerely want to help. Well-crafted questions, open and honest listening and reports back on how the advice was used will make the committee vibrant and strong.

Because an advisory committee

exists solely in an advisory capacity, what is its role in the decision-making process of an organization? A wise organization will seek recommendations from its advisers that can be taken to the board of directors.

Consider this example: A **nonprofit** group based in San Luis Obispo has an advisory committee in the North County, which is supposed to help the group understand North County issues. Decision items include recommending specific programs and services that would help meet needs in that region. The committee is not involved in any final decisions, but the board of directors receives valuable input about specific actions to take in North County.

A common complaint of **nonprofit** organizations is that advisory committee members don't attend

meetings.

Conversely, it is common to hear advisory committee members say the meetings aren't worth their time. An agenda that includes a balance of consulting, deciding and informing agenda items will make the committee's work more meaningful.

One final point about advisory committees is that the expectations of the members must be made clear at the time they are recruited to serve.

How many times has someone been recruited with the line, "All you need to do is come to two meetings a year!" This gives the impression that the focus is on filling chairs rather than focusing on the expertise of the members. A brief statement of purpose for the committee, a schedule of meetings and a commitment from the organization to have well-structured meetings is critical. If someone is going to sacrifice his or her time to volunteer with your organization, make his or her experience as worthwhile as possible.

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Resource Use

- Support nonprofit leadership
- Board development/training
- Strategic planning

Nonprofit Business Column of The Tribune

The San Luis Obispo Tribune publishes a column every other week in the Business section dedicated to the business practices of nonprofit orgs. Barry VanderKelen, Executive Director of the San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation writes the bi-

weekly column to help strengthen nonprofit organizations in the community. Each column is reprinted here as a one-page handout for use by local organizations. Barry can be reached at 543-2323 or by e-mail at barry@slocsf.org.