



Committee Charters

Democratic groups need to find a balance between inclusive participation and manageable meetings. On the one hand, there needs to be an open flow of information and active participation. On the other hand, it is easy to bog down in long and overwhelming meetings. This can take energy away from implementing the decisions made in those meetings, discourage meeting participation, and erode morale.

One of the greatest pitfalls of direct democracy is when a group is unable to let go of small decisions, so they pile up and prevent it from giving proper attention to the big decisions that really matter. At the same time, committees have their own risks. Poorly defined committees can create confusion about who is doing what, and sometimes committees may make decisions that conflict with decisions made by other committees.

In order to get out of this vicious cycle, committees should propose their committee charter to the steering committee, board, or general assembly (whichever body is ultimately responsible for governing the cooperative). This will be discussed and eventually approved, thereby giving your committee a set of clear general rights and responsibilities. The governing body thereby makes a general decision; the committee handles the specifics.

When setting up a committee charter, there are three main areas to address:

1. What are your committee processes?
2. What are you expected to discuss and propose?
3. What are you empowered to decide?

Committee Processes

Much of this structure should be uniform throughout your organization, set by the central body and adapted to each committee; this will aid in the smooth flow of information among committees and between the committees and the governing body. For example, there may be meeting frequency requirements or expectations about how your activities are communicated. It is important that each committee structure does not conflict with the structure of the organization as a whole. There are several areas that should be addressed.

- Who is your committee coordinator? This person is responsible for keeping track of who is on the committee, and serving as point of contact for the committee (with other committees, prospective committee members, etc.)
- Who takes minutes and what happens with them? This may be the responsibility of a committee secretary, or may be rotated. If they are done on a rotating basis, the

coordinator is responsible for keeping track of who is doing it next, and making sure that it still happens even in the event of an absence.

- What is your frequency and budget? When and how often do you meet? If you are paid for your meeting times, this will need to be factored into the overall committee budget. But the budget should also address how much money the committee has to spend on its activities, including supplies, outreach, etc.
- How are decisions made? This will ideally be determined by the governing body to promote some degree of uniformity and comprehensibility among the committees. But you should at least be clear about what threshold is required for decisions (majority, consensus, etc), as well as how your meetings are run.

Area of Responsibility

It is critical that each committee knows what it is doing, and what other committees are doing. Therefore, you should identify areas that are potentially going to overlap with the responsibilities of other committees.

In some cases, these distinctions will require substantial detail. It will not be enough to say that your committee “handles membership,” for example; you may have an outreach committee seeking out new members, an organizational committee that determines how members sign up, and a financial committee that tracks member investments and dues. And your operations committee might also have something to say about volunteer policies. You must be clear about who is doing what.

In some cases you will have to go back to your governing body one or more times, to refine the boundaries among committee responsibilities.

Committee Powers

Once you have determined your area of responsibility, you can address what decisions can be made by the committee, and what needs to go to the governing body. A decision should be made by the smallest group of people that still includes everyone who is affected by the decision. However, it is also crucial to remember that the governing body is ultimately responsible for what happens. So caution is necessary as you delegate responsibilities out to the committees.

You may set a purchase size limit, or an itemized budget, so that you can carry out routine activities without seeking approval at every step. For example, an outreach committee may be cleared to spend a certain amount each month on advertising in specific outlets, but given discretion about the size and frequency of each individual ad.

Generally speaking, committee powers should include decisions that are narrow in their impact, extensions of existing directions, and minimal in fiscal impact. This will free the main body to address the big picture.