

# How to Make A Management Advisory Committee Work for You

By MICHAEL J. KRUGER

**H**elp for the HRD practitioner can come in surprising packages. While "committee" sometimes sounds like a dirty word, well-chosen and managed advisory groups can serve as valuable sources for needs assessment, program development and evaluation, organizational support, publicity and for information that otherwise would not surface.

A review of pertinent literature coupled with a recent field experience in an adult continuing education institution suggests that the use of management advisory committees can enhance significantly the HRD manager's efficacy. While there has been some discussion of the use of committees and other special groups to facilitate HRD,<sup>1-4</sup> a comprehensive description of this process is needed. This article will provide background on the general use of advisory committees; outline the importance of selection, roles and responsibilities of the committee chairperson and members; suggest ways to enhance a committee's usefulness; summarize the results of a field experience on the use of advisory groups; identify some of the major pitfalls of using advisory groups; and discuss the implications of advisory committees for HRD.

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## Using advisory committees effectively

Advisory committees are small work groups appointed by an organization to perform special work assignments.<sup>5</sup> They can be temporary or permanent and can provide a wealth of advice that guides programs and mobilizes support.<sup>6</sup> Advisory committees may be composed of members who are internal or external to an organization or a combination of both. The committee should be large enough to provide the resources necessary to solve problems, but small enough to manage effectively.<sup>7</sup> Committees can be created for a variety of reasons, such as making decisions, providing recommendations or simply generating ideas.<sup>8</sup>

One of the first recorded uses of advisory committees can be traced to George Washington, who organized a group of citizens to resolve the Whiskey Rebellion.<sup>9</sup> Since then, the use of advisory groups in the federal sector has grown immensely to the point where an average of 900 national advisory committees were used by agencies during the period of 1972-1974.<sup>10</sup> The private sector also employs the services of such groups. Monsanto, for example, uses an international advisory committee composed of prominent academic scientists, who provide guidance to the company on matters of health and the environment.<sup>11</sup> Allied Chemical uses a scientific advisory committee to review

research and suggest new areas of study.<sup>12</sup>

There are many reasons why organizations use advisory committees to enhance the effectiveness of their decision-making:<sup>13</sup>

- Committees generate more innovative ideas than does an individual working alone.
- Group judgments are likely to be more accurate assessments of situations.
- Members generally support decisions they make as a group.
- Committees tap members' diverse talents and experiences.
- As members work together as a team, they tend to become more effective and synergistic.
- Committees are a good forum for coordinating efforts of different specialists.
- Committees can cause members and other managers to look at problems more deeply and reexamine their own biases and perspectives.

There are certain situations when the use of advisory committees is most appropriate:<sup>14-15</sup>

- When a solution is needed to a problem that impinges upon several departments.
- When coordination of a proposed solution is necessary.
- When knowledge derived from different specialties is needed.
- When problems call for wide airing in order to promote awareness throughout the organization.
- When jurisdictional questions need to be settled.

- When authority is divided so that no one individual can take action.

### Selecting the chairperson and members

Selecting the right person to chair the advisory committee is vital to the group's success, and it requires careful consideration. The person who is assigned responsibility for chairing the committee should possess a proper blend of leadership abilities and technical expertise. One author suggests choosing a highly esteemed member of the organization or of the professional community called upon to provide assistance.<sup>16</sup> In addition, there are a number of specific skills and abilities this individual should have:<sup>17</sup>

- The ability to keep a discussion focused on the topic and to minimize tangential dialogue, without becoming dictatorial.

- Skill in guiding discussions, listening and using appropriate questioning techniques.

- Ability to create and maintain an atmosphere conducive to group cohesiveness.

- Skill in managing time.
- Skill in delegation of assignments.
- Skill in managing administrative details, such as agendas, reports and dissemination of information needed by committee members.

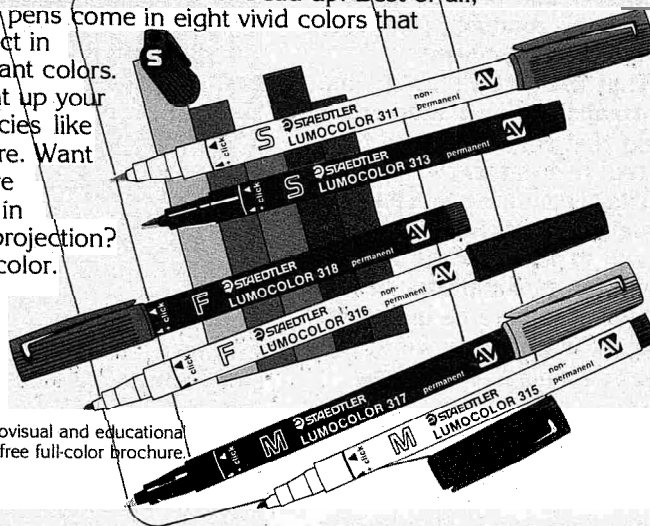
- The ability to motivate members and elicit cooperation.
- Skill in group problem-solving and decision making.
- The ability to work effectively with the sponsoring organization's staff.

The chairperson should be prepared to assume the following responsibilities:<sup>18</sup>

- Assist in the selection of personnel for the committee.
- Assure that all members understand the goals and purpose of the committee.
- Organize and initiate committee work.
- Prepare agendas and schedule meetings.
- Facilitate discussion.

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- Assign the work to members and subgroups.
- Summarize the group's progress.
- Present findings and recommendations.

Committee chairs should be prepared to evaluate the group's effectiveness. While their accomplishments can be judged in terms of meeting the objectives, its overall effectiveness can be assessed periodically by using the checklist provided in Figure 1.

Choice of committee members is also important to the group's efficacy, and care should be exercised to select the best resources. The literature points to a variety of factors which should be considered when recruiting members:<sup>19,20,21</sup>

- Members should be selected for their competence and expertise.
- Representation should be diverse, i.e., generalists and specialists.

- Relevant interests should be represented.
- Members should be willing to participate and should possess the time and other resources needed.

- Caution should be exercised concerning individuals whose motives for participating may be in conflict with the purpose of the group.

In soliciting membership in an advisory group, the sponsoring organization should express clearly the reasons for the committee's existence, its expected duration, the support that will be provided and the committee's relationship to the staff. Consideration should be given to rotating the role of chairperson, particularly for groups that will remain intact over extended periods.

### Enhancing committee utility

Committees' overall utility can be enhanced or diminished by a

number of specific actions. In a study of advisory committees used by the federal government, one author reported several recommendations for improving the use of young scientists' and engineers' advisory services:<sup>22</sup>

- That appointing agencies clearly define the functions of committees and provide guidelines for the conduct of activities to committee members.

- That the group's utility and performance be evaluated annually, and that committees be terminated, if necessary.

- That committee membership be balanced to include both the new and experienced, to allow a progression in committee service.

- That members be informed of the results of their work, such as decisions made concerning programs.

- That a general ethic of committee service be accepted, i.e., a person serves if committed to the advisory task and if able to provide the time and effort required.

- That the sponsoring organization recognize committee service.

### Some pitfalls to avoid

In the preceding sections of this article, a number of suggestions have been made for effectively selecting committee members and improving a committee's usefulness. In most cases, the converse or omission of these recommendations would constitute a pitfall. The literature outlines the following additional pitfalls to avoid when using advisory groups:<sup>23,24,25</sup>

- Letting full-time program staff inhibit the committee.
- Failing to provide adequate administrative support and other needed resources.
- Failure to remove an ineffective chairperson or member.
- Improper matching of a committee with a problem.
- Allowing politics to hamper the committee.

### A field experience

In order to gain insight into the application of advisory committees in the management of organizations, a qualitative

**Figure 1.**  
**A Diagnostic Checklist**  
**for**  
**Evaluating Committee Effectiveness**

Evaluation  
Needs Improvement  
Satisfactory

1. Are the chairperson and members:		
a. Clear about the group's objectives?	1a	
b. On time for meetings?	b	
c. Aware of what their job is?	c	
d. Task oriented?	d	
e. People oriented?	e	
2. Do the chairperson and members:		
a. Encourage participation and make it easy for people to express themselves?	2a	
b. Avoid rejecting or putting down the contribution of others?	b	
c. Elicit opinions and facts from members?	c	
d. Define and redefine problems to facilitate group discussion?	d	
e. Give good direction to the meeting without being domineering?	e	
f. Inspire confidence in the members' ability to get the job done?	f	
g. Prepare the committee for work in advance of the meeting?	g	
h. Strive to solve problems analytically on the basis of facts, rather than emotionally?	h	
i. Break down larger problems into smaller components and explore alternatives?	i	
j. Assign work to subgroups when appropriate?	j	
k. Help resolve differing viewpoints among members?	k	
l. Reach a decision after exploring alternatives?	l	
m. Conduct the meeting within the designated time?	m	
n. Know the limits of their authority?	n	
o. Know what resources are available from the sponsoring organization?	o	
3. Is there a good working relationship between the sponsoring staff and the committee?	3	
4. Are the roles and responsibilities of the committee and sponsoring staff clearly defined and mutually understood?	4	
5. Does the sponsoring organization provide feedback to the committee on the recommendations it makes?	5	

Adapted from Maude, B. *Managing meetings*. London: Business Books Limited, 1975 and Trecker, H.B. & Trecker, A.R. *Working with groups, committees and communities*. Chicago: Follett, 1979.

analysis was conducted in the Graduate School, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., during the period of January - April 1982. The approach used paralleled current qualitative evaluation methods which encompass observation, interview and document analysis. Observation was limited to one meeting which occurred prior to this study.

The Graduate School, USDA, provides a wealth of HRD opportunities to adults for improving their job performance, furthering their career and enriching their

lives. During 1980-1981, the school had more than 48,000 enrollments in courses ranging from photography to executive development.

The institution has a full-time staff of approximately 75 employees. One of the ways it manages its diverse programs is through approximately 30 advisory committees, which provide both comprehensive and specific guidance for administering the school. These committees consist of members of the school's staff, course instructors, students and professionals from government,

professional associations and industry. They meet several times a year and provide advice on academic excellence, curricula, administration and program planning.

During this study, interviews were conducted with three members of the Graduate School staff, four committee chairpersons and one committee member. In addition, a random sampling of the minutes from committee meetings was reviewed. The interviews focused on the role of advisory committees in the administration of an HRD program relevant to needs assessment, curriculum building, instructor recruiting, program planning, publicity and evaluation. The results of this assessment are summarized as follows:

- *Interviews.* All committee-member interviewees viewed their job on their committee as important because it: allows them

to contribute to the HRD needs of the community served; gives them a medium to develop further their leadership skills; and keeps them current on state-of-the-art developments in their field. In general, they found feedback on their committee's performance to be role reinforcing. At least one chairperson, however, expressed a desire to have more specific feedback on the results of recommendations. Three chairpersons said they had a clear picture of their roles and responsibilities; one expressed frustration over lack of clarity of his relationship to the school's staff. One committee chair noted that the school might not be aware of the committee's willingness to do more. All but one interviewee (who was retired from federal service) held executive positions in government at the time of the interview.

Interviews with the school's

staff surfaced the challenge they face in coordinating activities, staffing membership and maintaining a supportive and cooperative relationship with the committees. Staff understood the importance of selecting reputable, interested and experienced professionals to serve as chairpersons and members. They also were keenly aware of the valuable contribution advisory committees can make to the overall administration of their programs. They expressed concern over continually improving the effectiveness of committees by evaluating results and by developing staff in the skills necessary to work productively in groups.

- *Minutes.* A review of a random sample of the minutes from six committee meetings revealed a variety of subjects that are discussed at committee meetings, including: enrollment trends,

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techniques for marketing programs, the HRD needs of the students in light of changes in technology and other developments, existing and potential courses, recruiting instructors and committee members, facilities and information on state-of-the-art developments in the field.

• *Observation.* The one meeting that was observed generally supported the information that was uncovered through the interviews and minutes. Although several members of the school's staff were present, they played a facilitative role. The members represented agencies throughout the federal government, the local government and at least one professional organization. The group made recommendations which were general in nature, although one member had a specific proposal on a new course, which he presented when new business was discussed. The meeting lasted approximately two hours.

• *Summary of field experience.* In the area of needs assessment, committees are current in developments in their field. Members represent a powerful network of professionals who, by nature of their occupations and positions, provide a vital link to state-of-the-art changes in the profession. In addition, many are involved directly or indirectly with changes in government that have implications for HRD. Regarding curriculum building, the committees provide assistance in such areas as reviewing course proposals, generating new courses and updating existing courses and recommending instructional materials. Committees also play a vital role in program planning. They review the school's past performance, assist in scheduling courses and help recruit and select instructors. Of paramount importance are their abilities to generate new ideas concerning all aspects of the school's program and to disseminate information on the programs offered by the school.

Lastly, the committees evaluate their respective part of the school's program on a regular

basis. They receive copies of course evaluation forms and are quick to probe potential problems. In some cases, chairpersons will observe instructors and interview students as a means of evaluating courses.

### Implications for HRD

Advisory committees enhance the administration of HRD programs in organizations in several ways. Committees can provide a direct line of communication to managers who are responsible for the quality of the organization's work force. Managers and other employees who serve on committees monitor changes which have implications for HRD. Moreover, committee members who participate in decisions that are relevant to HRD tend to be more committed to carrying them out.<sup>26</sup>

In addition, committees can assist in prioritizing training needs, evaluating current programs and publicizing new HRD developments. They also serve as a valuable network for generating ideas and can foster cooperation across organizational lines. They can serve as a support system for the overall HRD effort and help create an organizational climate in which the HRD administrator is perceived as a member of the management team.

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