

Club Director

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PERSPECTIVES FOR LEADING PRIVATE CLUBS

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From Club
President to
NCA Chair

MEET

Malcolm MacColl



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“Stop the Meeting Madness,” cut out the committees?

Club managers are the experts in operating the club, and committees sometimes interfere in areas where they have little or no expertise, typically represent a small constituency of friends and family and consume too much management time.

DURING OUR SEPTEMBER 2022

NCA Point Counterpoint webcast (NCA members can access the recording for free at nationalclub.org/education/webinars) we debated several club issues, including club committees and whether they have outlived their usefulness.

My position was that committees still serve an essential role in club governance and operations and that most of the managers that we work with agree and welcome input from committees. Some of the points made were that they serve as advisory groups to department managers and club leadership, can provide knowledge and expertise club management may not possess, build bonds between committee members and management, can help champion management ideas and programs; and serve as farm teams for developing and identify future board leaders.

Dan held the position that the club industry has matured beyond the early days of stewards operating the club within the guidance of member committees. Club managers are the experts in operating the club, and committees sometimes interfere in areas where they have little or no expertise, typically represent a small constituency of friends and family and consume too much management time. Dan used the example of several well-known hotels, restaurants and other hospitality venues that are highly successful and function without advisory committees. Their boards leave it to management to run the operations. He made several strong points, and ultimately, Dan won the participants' poll on this, but both he and I (and I suspect, the webcast viewers) know committees should serve an essential role if managed correctly. I pursued

this topic further with a diverse group of managers during a roundtable discussion on committees I had the pleasure to moderate at NCA's recent National Club Conference in Chicago. Net findings, managers see the value in committees, but the criticism Dan offered above casts a shadow on the importance of committees.

DAN: In April, CBS News aired a report on the state of meetings. They reported that the number of meetings is up 153% since 2019 in U.S. businesses (calling it meeting bloat) and that, on average, committees reduce productivity by 17%. Preparation, attendance and follow-up (what they refer to as meeting recovery syndrome) to committee meetings can add up to half a workweek (normal workweek, not club's). This makes us question whether the benefits of holding meetings, whether formal as with most committees and or the ad-hoc meetings that often precede or follow the entire meeting, are worth the time and effort.

Profitable, well-run businesses generally pay for performance rather than process. Meetings protract processes, especially when there are participants, in this case, members, that management can't hold accountable for anything but their opinion.

BOB: Dan, I think you have finally hit upon the critical complaint against member committees from members and management alike: the time required of them in preparation, attendance and follow-up. When nothing of consequence is accomplished, they are further demoralized. My central point from our webcast was that meetings must be managed for effectiveness and efficiency, and that's the leader's job. You, unfortunately, pooh-pooh' d that,

questioning what club president will work with their committee appointees. After all, they're their friends and are volunteers. You may be right in most cases, but I'm not ready to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Leaders need to manage their flocks. On May 8, McKinsey & Company released an article, "*What is an Effective Meeting: Effective Meetings are all About Purpose, Preparation and Presentation.*" Dan, I'm anxious to hear your take on this. Is it the committee or the meeting that people object to? My wife Donna chaired several volunteer committees back in our hometown. She had no problem finding and retaining board and committee members because of her reputation for running an effective meeting. Committees met with regularity but only as needed. Participants were provided with the minutes of the

previous meetings, subcommittee minutes, white papers on subjects to be discussed, and a consent agenda amply ahead of each meeting. A clock hung prominently in the room; meetings started on time, chairs were given three minutes to amplify their written reports, and non-agenda items were deferred to the next meeting. When the clock struck 90 minutes later, the meetings ended and unfinished business was deferred to the next meeting. Directors felt their time was valued and respected, and things were accomplished in the end. Is this different from how a committee meeting should function, and if so, would a meeting not be beneficial?

DAN: A poorly run meeting is not a cause for the general disdain for committees in the club Industry; I'm all for a well-run

meeting. If necessary, do it right, but that still begs whether member committee meetings are still needed or desirable. A lobster is a fish designed by a committee. I particularly like the two sidebar sayings about committees by Henry Kissinger and Frank Moore Coby. Committees have long been the brunt of jokesters, generally for a good reason. Nonprofits are challenging to manage because their leaders lead by what James Collins, author of "Good to Great," refers to in his sequel, "The Social Sector;" as "legislative power," not executive power. These leaders represent and are beholden to their membership and constituency, not vice versa. Management can demand and manage their committees because they have executive control over them, and if they don't perform, ultimately, it's off with the GM's head. One can debate whether

the carrot or the stick is the most effective motivator; however, in the end, if the carrot doesn't work, there is always the stick for management, not so for the not-for-profit leader. Using the proverbial stick on a committee or board generally gets a GM a hall pass to binge old TV westerns.

BOB: Dan, I support the concept of committees and their club meetings, not as a necessary evil, but as a means to leverage the membership's valuable resources, skills, commitments, and support. Yes, they may only sometimes be highly efficient or practical. Still, as *Harvard Business Review* quoted a senior pharmaceutical executive as having said in their 2017 article "Stop the Meeting Madness:" "I believe that our abundance of meetings at our company is the cultural tax we pay for

the inclusive, learning environment that we want to foster—and I'm ok with that. If the alternative to more meetings is more autocratic decision-making, less input from all levels throughout the organization, and fewer opportunities to ensure alignment and communication by personal interaction, then give me more meetings any time."

While this executive is in a different industry than we are, his points about collaborative decision-making, aligning communications, and personal interactions are as important to clubs as they are to his business.

This McKinsey article discusses how to make meetings more productive, more rewarding, and less of a strain on the participants, not to eliminate them. I understand your position on committees as being that they often misunderstand

their purpose or cannot resist micro-managing their particular area of concern and that management would be more effective without their input. I think that most GMs would disagree that committee input is not valuable but agree that it can sometimes be very counterproductive. Club managers spend innumerable hours preparing, attending, and following up on committee and board meetings. This time adds to what is already a long work week and takes away from available time to listen to the operation's oversight and focus without distractions on essential issues. Department managers such as the superintendent, golf professional and chef put in long hours that start early and have an extra long day when committee meetings are scheduled at night. Are these meetings a productive use of their time?

DAN: Bob, this is precisely my point! There is this new thing out there called technology. Educational meetings can be held online, warehoused, and viewed when needed, avoiding busy operating times. Decision meetings can be controlled by the actual decision-makers, who are then held accountable for the decisions, gaining the committee's perspective before the meeting. GM and department-level managers already have demanding jobs running their departments, and time taken away from those tasks is expensive to the club in productivity, job satisfaction, and creative time to improve and drive the business. It is a nice thought that we can engage with the membership and give them a higher sense of ownership through their participation on a committee, but at what cost? Clubs are known to

be enormously inefficient, providing many services that only some members want or avail themselves of, starting and stopping projects from one administration to another, and trying to be all things to what has become increasingly more diverse memberships. Meetings are undoubtedly necessary for communication, engagement and resolving issues. Still, they can become counterproductive when institutionalized as a standing committee with representatives of competing constituencies and without a discrete purpose. The standing committee meeting illustrates that counter-productivity.

BOB: I had consistently held that committees are only influential when appropriately managed to meet their designated purposes. Management is

responsible for operations meetings, and the board, through the president, is responsible for keeping the volunteer member committee productive and on track. We can do this through clear and concise committee charters, club-specific grants and limits of authority and discrete oversight. The president need not be dictatorial and offensive to his appointees. In the social sector, as Collins points out in his book, these legislative leaders have other sources of influence and power, such as:

- "Inclusion Power" is the ability to give someone an opportunity to be included and feel part of something, e.g., a great golf program, excellent food and beverage program, etc.
- They have the "Power of Persuasion," bringing agreement upon goals and objectives.

Ha ha!

Committee Rules— Dr. Harry Chapman

- ✓ Never arrive on time, or you will be stamped a beginner.
- ✓ Wait to say something until the meeting is half over; this stamps you as being wise.
- ✓ Be as vague as possible; this prevents irritating others.
- ✓ When in doubt, suggest that a subcommittee be appointed.
- ✓ Be the first to move for adjournment; this will make you famous—it's what everyone is waiting for.

"If you ever live in a country (Club) run by a committee, be on the committee."

—William Graham Sumner

"Committees are consumers and sometimes sterilizers of ideas, rarely creators of them."

—Henry Kissinger.

"We always carry out by committee anything which any of us alone would be too reasonable to pursue."

—Frank Moore Coby, Educator

- They have a "Shared Interest" in the services that the committees oversee.
- They have "Coalition Power," bringing members together for the betterment of the club.

The president has these tools in their arsenal, making it not so big an ask that they are expected to provide oversight of committees. As with the best practice of developing individual charters for each committee, the board should adopt a format for conducting its and its committees' meetings that follow best practices.

BOB & DAN: Although we may disagree on the efficacy of club committees, meetings are an effective tool to foster relationships, collaborate on decisions, communicate, and obtain diverse perspectives. The HBR, in their article on "Stop the Meeting Madness," and Dr. Keith Cook, in a "Communication Briefings Newsletter," provide these guidelines for effective meetings and productive use of the individual's and group's time.

- Have as few meetings as necessary. McKinsey warns against the "triple whammy:" meetings that are too frequent, poorly timed and badly run. For most clubs, quarterly meetings of committees are adequate to cover the real business of the committee.
- Use the correct table. Round tables are preferable, but broad rectangular is preferable to long rectangles. Everyone should be within eye and ear contact.
- Never do the meeting before the meeting. They demoralize those not included in prior decision-making. Smaller boards and committees enable everyone to participate.
- Distribute meeting materials adequately ahead of the meeting date. Include white papers on the background of decision points. Use a consent-style agenda to facilitate acceptance of minutes and reports that need not be regurgitated.
- Start and end the meeting on time. Have a good size clock on the wall and keep track of the time. Open-ended meetings lead to micro-management and wasted time.
- Encourage everyone to be brief in their responses so that everyone can speak.
- Move the meeting along. Lead discussions with proposals versus open-ended questions. Have drafts of motions that are to be presented and prepared in advance.
- Have a no-tech policy. Cell phones and laptops are to be put away, as well

as not allowing members to work on personal work during the meeting. Keep everyone engaged.

- Hold the consumption of alcoholic beverages until after the meeting.

Although Dan and I present these as opposing views, neither of us believes that all committees should be abolished, more so that the club will operate more effectively and efficiently without any more meetings than are necessary. When practical, synergistic areas of operations should be combined, such as Green and Golf, Racquets Sports, House, and Locker Room and Fitness. Subcommittees formed for particular purposes, such as decorating, food and beverage, and entertainment, should be under the House Committee, and squash, paddle and pickleball subcommittees of Racquets. Risk Management may be a subcommittee of Finance. Grouping of committees should consider the amount and time required for their workload. Racquets, for example, may cover several racquets sports, but with differing seasons, the committee may meet year-round without excessive work in any one season. Only subcommittee chairs sit on the parent committee, not their members, so keep the parent committee as small as possible.

The board should set an example for committees regarding how meetings should be run. They should approve a policy procedure that lays out principles such as those listed above, implement the policy and make them broadly known to all board and committee members. [CD](#)



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