

How to create a functional, effective advisory committee

What Successful Partnerships Do: A series of practical guides

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INTRODUCTION

CONTENTS

What is an advisory committee, and why have one?

Steps for implementing a functional, efficient advisory committee

Don't forget!

Final words

Want to know more?
Suggested resources

References

Putting an advisory committee in place can be a good way to involve and engage the community in your organization's work. However, not all advisory committees are engaged, functional, and effective! This basic guide offers tips drawn from HC Link consultants' experiences as well as other resources. It will help community organizations use best practices for creating advisory committees as an element of supporting community engagement. The guide may be useful to others as well.

WHAT IS AN ADVISORY COMMITTEE, AND WHY HAVE ONE?

Simply put, an advisory committee provides advice on a specific project, event, or issue. Advisory committees tend to be used only occasionally. They are usually time-limited; typically dissolving after the work for which they provided advice has been completed¹. Advisory committee members can provide valuable experience, expertise and perspectives that add richness and authenticity to the project. An advisory committee can facilitate communication between community members and can serve as a liaison between program staff, local partners, and community members. An advisory committee can provide a mechanism for engagement and information exchange. In this way, the committee highlights the value of all stakeholders' contributions.

What sets advisory committees apart from other types of committees is that the organization who has struck the committee is under no obligation to take the advice or recommendations that it puts forward (although it frequently does)¹.

An advisory committee, in a community context, is a structure often formal but non-decision-making in which the mandate consists of giving advice, of formulating opinions, or of making recommendations on questions where the topic affects the community. In general, advisory committee members are volunteers.

Adapted from *[l'Office québécois de la langue française](#)*, 2003²



STEPS FOR IMPLEMENTING A FUNCTIONAL, EFFICIENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

1. Define the mandate, purpose and objectives of the committee

As previously stated, advisory committees provide advice and make recommendations to the organization or group leading the project, who is under no obligation to take this advice. For that reason, it is important to clearly define the mandate (the committee's reason for being), purpose and objectives for the committee. Generally, this is done by the organization carrying out the project. It is essential that the mandate and other requirements are put in writing and that they are the object of a deeper discussion within the committee once it is in place. A common documentation tool is a Terms of Reference. Include:

- ▶ the name of the committee;
- ▶ the mandate, purpose and objectives for the committee;
- ▶ the responsibilities of the committee;
- ▶ the committee's recruitment process;
- ▶ the committee's ideal composition;
- ▶ the committee's ways of working, including meeting frequency, roles and responsibilities/expectations,
- ▶ any relevant deadlines; and
- ▶ any necessary resources (budget, expenses/spending, reimbursements).

2. Recruit members

Member recruitment must be done strategically. In the context of the committee's mandate and objectives, consider the experience, knowledge of the field/topic and any specific expertise which you need to advance the project. Advisory committee members should be representative of the target audience/population of your project, initiative or event.

Next, recruit members that meet these criteria and add value for the committee and the project. The Terms of Reference is an important tool for recruitment, as it clearly defines the role, purpose and expectations for committee members.

To promote good group dynamics, an advisory committee should ideally be composed of five to ten members³. In all cases, the committee should be versatile in its composition and should reflect the diversity of the community.⁴

3. Identify roles and expectations

An advisory committee always needs to involve people outside the organization. These external members attend meetings, offering opinions and expertise; review materials where appropriate; and consult with their home organization, specific community or population as necessary.

The organization convening the advisory committee typically takes on meeting logistics as well as chairing the meetings, preparing agendas and minutes, and related tasks.

4. Define how the committee will function

The advisory committee's ways of work must be clearly defined in the Terms of Reference and established from the beginning. In particular, provide clarity about how the committee will hold meetings, make recommendations, consider equity, and evaluate their work.

Good practices for an efficiently functioning advisory committee:

- ▶ **Adopt an approach based in equity and inclusion.**⁵ The [Equity Analysis of Group Membership](#) model from the Collaborative Leadership in Practice project (CLiP) is a good resource to support an advisory committee's initial reflections.
- ▶ **Effective meetings.** The HC Link resource [Effective Meetings](#) gives the essential ingredients for successful meetings.
- ▶ **Evaluate each committee meeting.** This evaluation should be inclusive and participative. To find examples of engaging, participative evaluation techniques, consult the HC Link resource [The Power of Reflection: An introduction to participatory evaluation techniques](#).

OTHER PROMISING PRACTICES TO CONSIDER

Member compensation: If your budget will allow it, consider compensating volunteer advisory committee members (who are contributing their own time and who are not being paid by another organization) for their time and expertise.

Member recognition: If it is not possible to compensate volunteers, identify other ways to show them that their work is appreciated. Consider offering refreshments during meetings, reimbursement of transportation costs, training opportunities, and presenting plaques or certificates of appreciation.

Orientation/team-building sessions for new members: We prefer the term *orientation* to *training*. New members of the committee will benefit from an orientation session on the project, event or issue, their role and responsibilities, and on equity. In addition to increasing knowledge, this activity permits members to reinforce their skills in engagement and community participation. Subsequent team-building sessions should be offered at minimum annually, taking into consideration the frequent personnel changes that are typical in the community arena.

Rotate meeting location: Rotate the location of committee meetings amongst members who have the ability to host committee meetings. This practice promotes member participation and involvement.

DON'T FORGET!

The winning conditions for a functional, efficient committee are:

- ▶ The committee's mandate, purpose and objective are clearly defined;
- ▶ Recruitment of members is done in a strategic and equitable way;
- ▶ The roles and expectations of committee members are clearly defined;
- ▶ Good mechanisms for committee functioning are in place and respected;
- ▶ Members' contributions are appreciated and valued;
- ▶ The committee develops a culture of equity at its centre;
- ▶ The committee regularly evaluates its own work.

FINAL WORDS

An active, efficient advisory committee can be a real asset for a program or a community initiative. It not only re-affirms and reinforces community participation but also provides an enriching experience to its members. Committee members need to be appreciated and recognized for this volunteer work.

However, the advisory committee must not be the sole mechanism by which community participation is sought. Community meetings, discussion groups, an idea box, and surveys are other ways of collecting comments and contributions from members of the community.

WANT TO KNOW MORE? SUGGESTED RESOURCES

[Equity Analysis of Group Membership: A CLiP Template](#), CLiP-LCP Project, 2016

[The Power of Reflection: An introduction to participatory evaluation techniques](#), HC Link, 2016

[Terms of Reference Builder](#), HC Link, 2014

REFERENCES

- ¹ HC Link. *Governing for Partnership Success*. Toronto, ON. 2010.
- ² Office québécois de la langue française. « [Fiche terminologique](#) ». 2003.
- ³ Health Communication Capacity Collaborative. *Community Engagement*. Baltimore, MD. 2014.
- ⁴ CanWEA. *Best Practices for Indigenous and Public Engagement*. Ottawa, ON. 2017.
- ⁵ City of Ottawa and City for All Women Initiative. *Equity and Inclusion Lens Handbook*. Ottawa, ON. 2015.

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