

# **Developing Effective Study Committees**

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Study committees can generate considerable enthusiasm with recommendations that will help solve the community's problems. They can develop a "group spirit" that carries over into the community. This "group togetherness" is greatly influenced by methods study committees use.

While there is no one way of achieving a "group spirit," there are known factors that influence its development.

## **Purpose and goals**

A study committee working within a community will give time and effort to their assignment when:

- There is real need to study an issue
- There is a reasonable chance of achieving its goal.

When these conditions exist and remain foremost, continuation of the effort is usually assured.

Institutions or organizations appointing study committees need to make purpose and goals clear to committee members. They may undergo change during the search and discovery process, but newly created goals and purposes need constant clarification to the committee and parent body.

## **Membership and commitment**

When members are chosen or accepted as volunteers, the basis for continued membership on the committee is linked with their:

- Interest
- Ability to add to the group
- Commitment to purpose and goals

Once the "group" begins to form, members develop expectations and move toward becoming a working team.

There is considerable value in constant membership in the group. New members being added or old ones dropping out affect the group's psychological and sociological structure. Members get to know each other, develop positive attitudes, and build a trust relationship that affects the group's communication and productivity. Even when there is diverse opinion on an issue, there exists an "open climate" that permits exploration and a movement toward consensus.

# Stages of becoming a group

Time and active participation are essentials for group development. Such group development can be observed by behavioral changes in the group. Five stages are apparent:

- **Dependence**

Most new groups are very dependent on a leader. The leader may be assigned by the appointing body or elected by the group. Such a leader may gain control of the group, direct its activities and assume much of the responsibility. If a controlled type of leadership continues, the group's productivity will be limited to the leader's skills. Group maintenance and participation may be a problem.

- **Counter-independence**

If opportunity for free self-expression is permitted and members accept the challenge, they also begin to accept responsibilities that were placed on the "leader" in the dependence stage.

Inexperienced members may be reluctant to accept responsibility. Thus, they are apt to suggest to the leader, "You tell us what to do," or "What do you think is the answer?" In this stage the members may blame the leader for the lack of organization or progress. If the leader can encourage them to move beyond this stage, the group then advances into stage 3.

- **Counter-dependence**

When committee members feel the leader is not going to take all the responsibility and is really asking their individual cooperation, they may subconsciously shift this "leader" responsibility to another member. Individuals used to highly-structured, controlled and directed procedure may struggle for some new or different procedure.

Members may also become hostile toward their appointed leader and resist any suggestions he or she may make to get going. A leader inexperienced with this method or one who has not been trained in group dynamics may assume a traditional role and begin to use controlled methods. If he or she moves in a controlled direction, the members of the study committee may relax and return to the dependent stage.

- **Independence**

In the struggle between stages 3 and 4 there may be evidence of some hostility, or the group may completely leave the business at hand. Joking and irrelevant remarks may take some time. This period may appear to be a wasted session, and some who seek a quick solution may actually drop out. However, some study committee members will begin to think on their own about the problem or the purposes and goals for which they were established.

- **Interdependence**

Change in a working group begins to take place as individuals begin to express their thinking and feelings about an issue. Opinions may differ, but the group begins to recognize the issue and realize their assignment takes more than "off-the-cuff opinions" to resolve.

Members may be at different stages at any one time, or the group may waver between stages before it jointly accepts its responsibility in the interdependence stage.

## The leader's role

The leader's role in a study group is difficult. Most individuals who have chaired a committee have prior experience in a controlled or directed method.

The chairman who begins to switch his or her role from a control position to that of a group leader must unlearn this procedure. The switch can pose a real threat to the leader's ego and status. However, if other committee members are to be involved they must accept as much responsibility as the chairman.

Changes that take place in beliefs, values and attitudes are internal. A group can assist in making changes in which they have mutually shared the responsibility in creating a decision. In this type of exploration, a sense of cohesiveness and cooperation can be developed.

A working relationship within the committee can be facilitated by the chairman. This is done by the chairman's methods. The leader who is interested in developing people by increasing their ability to direct their own affairs by increasing effective decision making and maximizing personal development will recognize the self-esteem and dignity of each committee member.

The participative chairman will encourage the committee to:

- Develop an agenda and time schedule as the group moves through the process of study and decision making
- Develop topics, goals and means to goal achievement to fit the ever-changing situation
- Help each member participate in creating the needed strategy and in selecting information and needed resources
- Help each member learn, understand, communicate, and heighten interest and awareness
- Consider suggestions on their own merit, rather than on who makes them
- Develop its own controls for the over-talkative member and encourage silent members to participate vocally.

Inter-group relationships are affected by a number of factors:

- Openness is essential for group growth, understanding and trust. Unless each participant can be frank and say what he thinks, feels and is willing to do, group participation is only a pretense. Individuals are reluctant to "open up" because they may be vulnerable to exploitation and misunderstanding unless a process of sharing real thinking and real feeling through a trust relationship is developed. The "things" a group accomplishes lack the participants' real support and commitment unless each member is involved in their creation.
- Freedom at all times to choose, differ and gain new insights can be achieved only in an atmosphere of freedom to think, to feel and to speak.

Learning and change are not a result of a single activity. Beliefs are tied together in a constellation or system of beliefs and balanced by the individual to make sense. Beliefs are related to past experience. When a part of an individual's belief system is distorted, the individual makes internal readjustments to maintain his balance of beliefs. Beliefs, attitudes and values are under constant revision to give life a wholeness. Psychological adjustments and readjustments must be done by the individual. They cannot be forced.

Changes in norms, sentiments, customs and other sociological elements can take place as a result of discussion between individuals in groups. The chances for psychological and sociological changes are enhanced in a non-threatening climate in small groups.

- Communication involves much more than the spoken or written language. Impressions are as important as expressions. Meanings reside only in people. An experience and the interpretation of the experience by the individual give it significance. No two individuals have the same experience. Individuals may attempt to convey messages explicitly by using words, gestures and other observable means, but they also use an implied language. Feelings are often communicated through the implied.

Discussion and feedback in a warm, permissive, trustful climate improve communication. The interacting process improves understanding and the possibility for change.

- Spontaneity is essential to group creativity. The freedom to act in an unplanned, informal way is related to the three factors above. Spontaneity creates its own enthusiasm and individual commitment. Heightened interest enables the group to turn its energies toward real group problems.

## Summary

Study of issues play a vital role in intelligent community decision making. However, beliefs, attitudes and values may block out "facts" and information.

The psychological, or inner, structure of individuals can be changed only when people want to change them. Community norms, sentiments and customs may be impediments to individual change.

Changes on the thinking level (belief level) seem to be facilitated greatly in a small group in which the "group climate" is developed through a working, interacting situation.

The real road blocks to community development may be in the human relations areas. But the real potentials for community development can also be found in these areas.

For additional information, contact your MU Extension community development specialist through your local MU

Extension center, or the Department of Community Development, MU, Clark Hall, Columbia.

## Related MU Extension publications

- DM404, The Study Committee and the Community  
<http://extension.missouri.edu/p/DM404>
- DM460, A Plan for Small Group Discussion  
<http://extension.missouri.edu/p/DM460>

Order publications online at <http://extension.missouri.edu/explore/shop/> or call toll-free 800-292-0969.



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