

# 11 ADVISORY COMMITTEE CHALLENGES & HOW TO FIX THEM

Advisory committees – we love them and we hate them – and we can't stop setting them up. They're possibly the number one method of engagement in Australia.

Advisory committees have become a standard way of operating. They can be short term or provide advice for years and, typically, they comprise either experts in the field and/or stakeholder representatives.

When used effectively, these groups can provide an opportunity to gather local knowledge and input, test ideas and proposals and improve communication and relationships.

They are not, however, good substitutes for a comprehensive engagement approach, and should never be used in isolation, because they're unlikely to bring a truly diverse range of views to the table. In fact, when used improperly and/or run poorly, they can create more risk than reward.

If your organisation has a committee in place or has decided to establish one, these 11 tips will help to ensure both organisation and group benefits from the experience.

## 1 LACK OF DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

### THE PROBLEM:

Only known stakeholders respond to your EOI. They tend to be those with strong views about the topic or your organisation.

### HOW TO ADDRESS IT:

It's important that known stakeholders are involved in your process, but alternative recruitment approaches can bring fresh eyes to (and attract people without a vested interest in) the topic. They include:

- Stakeholder analysis: Identify a full range of people with a stake in the topic and then recruit based on specific categories.
- Random selection: Use stratified random sampling (recruiting unknown people who fit into identified categories)

## 2

## DISCONNECTED DECISION MAKERS

### THE PROBLEM:

Decision makers are disconnected from the committee. Trust issues are evident on both sides, undermining the very relationship you are trying to nurture.

### HOW TO ADDRESS IT:

There are many ways to involve decision makers and increase trust. For example:

- The chair can be a decision maker (offering a direct reporting line between them and the broader decision making group). This approach has its pros and cons, and success depends on that individual's chairing skills.
- Committee members can write their own reports (increasing transparency, ownership and buy-in). Committee members then personally present these reports to decision makers.

## 3

## A CONFUSED, FRUSTRATED OR DIRECTIONLESS COMMITTEE

### THE PROBLEM:

Members have unrealistic expectations and a lack of direction. They may provide advice that isn't aligned with what the organisation is seeking, and their outputs aren't implemented, causing frustration.

### HOW TO ADDRESS IT:

- Develop clear, concise terms of reference (avoid vague or government-style language).
- Ensure the group is clear on the problem they are being asked to address, what level of influence they will have and how their input will be used.
- Ensure decision makers are clear on and have agreed to these parameters.
- Create a high level (yet flexible) roadmap that guides the committee's activities and build in regular reviews to check the group is on track.

## 4

## A LACK OF REAL INFLUENCE

### THE PROBLEM:

Disappointment and perceptions of a tokenistic or non-transparent process cause tension between the committee and the organisation.

### HOW TO ADDRESS IT:

Committees require a real opportunity to influence an issue, process or decision - otherwise they can't operate effectively or build trust with the organisation. Only topics that the committee can have a real influence over should be on the agenda.



## 5

# CONFLICT OR TENSION IS IGNORED

### THE PROBLEM:

Conflict or tension is being ignored, and the group is focusing on simplistic, polarised viewpoints and conducting a superficial exploration of information and evidence.

### HOW TO ADDRESS IT:

- Embrace and plan for conflict – it's a necessary part of solving problems.
- Allow tensions to surface early.
- Provide adequate time and information so the group can consider the complexities of the issue.
- Engage an experienced facilitator who will ensure these conversations are navigated successfully.

## 6

# INFORMATION OVERLOAD

### THE PROBLEM:

Meetings are used solely for information sharing and there's no time for useful discussion. The group is unable to identify everyone's ideas and weigh up options.

### HOW TO ADDRESS IT:

- Send information out prior to the meeting as written material. If information must be shared during the meeting, use engaging techniques – avoid boring presentations!
- Engage a facilitator who can use techniques like small group discussions. These activities allow everyone an opportunity to speak and the group can grapple with more ideas in less time.

## 7

# POORLY CHAIRED MEETINGS

### THE PROBLEM:

A poorly chaired or facilitated committee can result in an array of issues including: some voices being drowned out and precious air time dominated by one or two members, a group getting stuck on certain issues, participation rates reducing because members feel uncomfortable or unheard, reduced quality of discussion and outputs, time not being used efficiently or effectively and perceptions that the process is not independent or transparent (when run by the lead organisation or decision maker).

### HOW TO ADDRESS IT:

Invest in an independent facilitator with experience. They will ensure that discussions are enhanced via shared guidelines that ensure openness, listening, and airing of diverse opinions, and help to build trust and respect between all participants.



## 8

# OUTRAGE OR EMOTION HALTS PROGRESS

### THE PROBLEM:

Committee members are outraged or emotional about the organisation's past decisions, issues or behaviour and there is a lack of trust. There's a lack of movement or positive progress.

### HOW TO ADDRESS IT:

The experiences and concerns of group members as well as the past mistakes made by the organisation need to be acknowledged up front. Acknowledging and addressing issues and conflict is an important part of working with it successfully. An experienced facilitator can greatly assist the group to work through these blocks.

## 9

# TUNNEL VISION

### THE PROBLEM:

Committee members begin to think their view is the *only* view and forget to represent and communicate with broader stakeholders/the community.

### HOW TO ADDRESS IT:

- Clarify roles in the terms of reference.
- Remind the group of their role/purpose at every meeting.
- Give members a role in the wider engagement process, actively building this process into the 'DNA' of the committee.
- Provide clear pathways and easy-to-read (engaging) materials for members to share with their networks between meetings.
- Invite each member to bring someone along to every second meeting - dedicate the first 30mins to sharing information from outside the committee.

## 10

# RIGID PROCESSES

### THE PROBLEM:

Rigid, organisation-led agendas leave committee members disengaged, lower the quality of group outputs and cause important ideas and conversations to be missed.

### HOW TO ADDRESS IT:

- Avoid inflexible, short agendas run under standard meeting rules.
- Design tailored sessions that meet the group's needs and build in discussion time and flexibility.
- Work with your committee to develop agendas.



**THE PROBLEM:**

Members of the group behave badly and show a lack of respect for one another. The group is polarised or entrenched around the issue or dilemma.

**HOW TO ADDRESS IT:**

- Co-design a set of agreed guidelines with the group, check in with them when necessary and evaluate against these behaviours
- Build capacity within the group so members have the ability respectfully question each other's views and moderate each other and themselves. Critical thinking techniques or skills in identifying biases can assist in encouraging positive group dynamics.

MosaicLab's 'do's and don'ts of group decision making' video is also a handy resource for use in a group setting.

It's important to remember that advisory committees are just one form of engagement and there are numerous other techniques available. So, our number one tip is to assess whether an advisory committee is really what you need or whether there are other, more effective options available.

**A FINAL,  
IMPORTANT  
TIP**

If you need help determining whether an advisory committee is right for your project/issue or if you would like to explore other possible methods of engagement, MosaicLab can help. We're also available to provide you with an experienced facilitator that can help ensure your existing committee is as effective as possible. Get in touch with us here.

**NEED  
ADVISORY  
COMMITTEE  
ASSISTANCE?**

THIS FREE RESOURCE WAS ORIGINALLY POSTED ON OUR BLOG - READ THE [FULL POST HERE](#)