



# How committees should operate

**M**argaret Mead once said, "A small group of committed people can make a difference and change the world."

That doesn't seem to be the case for many university committees. Some committees work well. Unfortunately, many don't. Poorly run committees waste university time and resources, and sometimes lead to disastrous results.

How do effective committees operate? Are their diagnostic tools and remedies for those that don't?

## Characteristics of effective committees

The eight characteristics of an effective committee can be grouped according to how its business is conducted (process elements); how the committee

is structured and supported (structural elements); or the commitment, morale, and results achieved (the outcome elements).

*The four process elements.* Effective committees 1) have a clear focus that all committee members support, 2) work well together, 3) communicate often with each other and with their stakeholders, and 4) exhibit leadership sharing—that is, most members of the committee will step forward and contribute, not leaving all the work to the chairperson.

*The two structural elements.* 5) An effective committee is composed of the right people. 6) The best run committees usually have a strong sponsor that provides resources and guidance; shows interest in the committee's workings; and promotes the work

of the committee on campus.

*The two outcome elements.* Effective committees produce two observable outcomes: 7) group chemistry and 8) results. Committee members exhibit good morale and enjoy working together. They also consistently meet their goals and timelines.

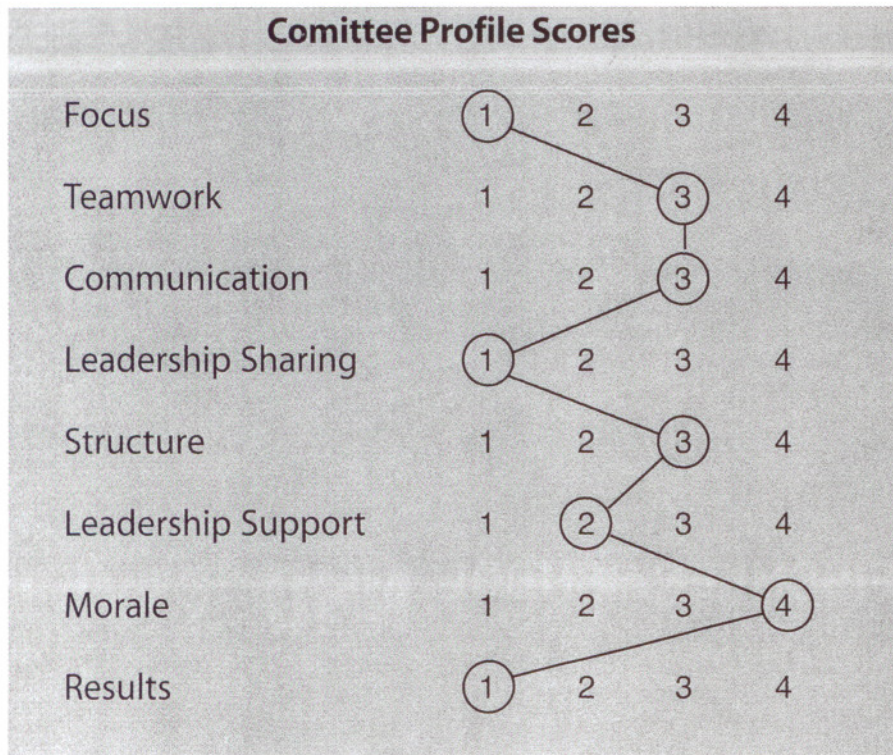
## How to diagnose and fix committee problems

The eight desirable characteristics can be profiled and scored for diagnostic purposes.

In the example, scores of "3" and "4" represent strengths, while scores of "1" and "2" represent weaknesses. In an instant an observer sees clearly the strengths and weaknesses of the committee, and can counsel the committee chair in how to improve the performance of the group.

In this example team morale is good and they enjoy working together. However, results are not good, because the focus is not clear and only one or two people are pitching in to do the work.

Elbert Hubbard, a publisher, editor and author at the turn of the century, once lamented, "A committee is a thing which takes a week to do what one good person can do in an hour." If you want to improve the work of committees on campus, spend time coaching your committee chairs on the eight characteristics model. ■



Contact the author for a copy of this tool



**DR. ED CORNELIUS** is an industrial psychologist by training and a university professor by background who now heads up Collegiate Project Services. Contact him at [e.cornelius@collegiateproject.com](mailto:e.cornelius@collegiateproject.com)