

# How to Lead a Committee

LEADERS & STAFF



**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

# Practical Ministry Skills: How to Lead a Committee

**Contents** ..... PAGE

**Leader’s Guide**.....2

**Leading a Meeting**

    HOW TO LEAD A MEETING  
    by *Michael Harbin*.....3–4

    CULTIVATING PRODUCTIVITY  
    by *John Maxwell*.....5

    HOW TO JUDGE AN IDEA  
    by *James Watkins* .....6

    LEAD YOUR BOARD TO WORSHIP  
    by *Charles M. Olsen*.....7

    WHEN NOT TO PRESS FOR A VOTE  
    by *Michael Harbin*.....8

**Leading a Group**

    IMPROVING GROUP DYNAMICS  
    by *Larry Osborne* .....9

    COMMON CONFLICTS  
    by *Chuck Swindoll* .....10

    NOT COMMITTEES, BUT COMMUNITIES  
    by *Roberta Hestenes* .....11

**Resources**

    FURTHER EXPLORATION.....12

## HOW TO LEAD A COMMITTEE

### Leader's Guide

*How to use "Practical Ministry Skills" by BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS in your regularly scheduled meetings.*

*Welcome to BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: Your Complete Guide to Leadership Training. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders who can think strategically and biblically about the church. Selected by the editors of Leadership Resources and Christianity Today, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.*

"Practical Ministry Skills" is completely flexible and designed to be easy to use. Each theme focuses on a practical area of church ministry and comprises brief handouts on specific aspects of that ministry. The handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues most relevant to your goals.

This specific theme is designed to equip those who lead church boards or committees. You may use it either for a group training session or to give individually to people who are stepping into leadership. Simply print the handouts you need and use them as necessary.

For example, to review some key principles for leading a committee, see "How to Lead a Meeting" (pp. 3–4). For advice on evaluating new ideas and proposals, see "How to Judge an Idea" (p. 6). For help improving interactions on a board or committee, read "Improving Group Dynamics" (p. 9). To consider methods for redefining your board around a sense of mission, read Roberta Hestenes's "Not Committees, but Communities" (p. 11).

We hope your leaders, committees, and boards grow in their ability to serve through the principles and tools in this theme.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at [www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com](http://www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com).

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**HOW TO LEAD A COMMITTEE****How to Lead a Meeting**

*Certain skills and behaviors can make you a great chairperson.*

1 Timothy 3:1

People enjoy order. They also enjoy expressing their opinions. A successful chairperson is one who can balance these two desires. Those who are too rigid look like dictators; those who are too loose appear out of control. Unfortunately, no chairperson will satisfy everybody, just as nobody will be happy with every group decision. Despite that, here are some of the principles I use to set up a great meeting:

**Prepare Ahead of Time**

I've learned to ask four basic questions as I prepare for a meeting:

- *What is the reason for the meeting?* Boards and committees with regular meeting times can be a trap. The board I chair is scheduled to meet every other Sunday afternoon. The tendency is for such meetings to become an end in themselves. That's not my intention, so now if I lack agenda items, I check with the pastor. If nothing is urgent, we feel free to cancel unnecessary meetings.
- *What are our goals?* A meeting's goal expresses the direct, tangible result I expect. A meeting might have one reason and try to achieve several goals. Or there might be several reasons and one goal. To ensure that goals are met, we keep them to a minimum and express them clearly. I often find it better to schedule more than one meeting to reduce the confusion. With a limited agenda, our meetings run smoother, and there is higher interest because they are shorter and more to the point.
- *How will we achieve these goals?* Once I delineate goals, I develop a plan that includes a schedule that logically develops the issue. A schedule is essential; it lays out the process. I like the schedule to develop logically. Note the following schedule for a church board:
  1. Opening
  2. Current state of the budget
  3. Discussion
  4. Choir proposal to earn new robes
  5. Proposal to meet janitorial needs
  6. Proposed new budget
  7. Vote

In this outline, I have tried to anticipate questions and answer them by the order and wording of the items. This saves time. It also leads to a decision, because the issues are clearly defined.

- *Are there any hidden agendas?* Hidden agendas are ulterior motives behind our activities. These may be advantageous. Sometimes, however, they can ambush you. Before going into a meeting, I ask, *What hidden motives might be present, and how will they affect the meeting?*

With a clear understanding of hidden agendas, I can do one of two things. First, I can go to the person before the meeting and discuss an issue one-on-one. If that doesn't work, I can drag the issue out into the open in the committee meeting. This second option is less effective, but it is important if the first doesn't work.

**Take a Firm Hand**

When we present any issue, questions and discussion will certainly follow. We might as well include it on the schedule. So I clearly set down times for discussion at appropriate places, and this lets me more easily control the amount and direction of it.

Where there is genuine interest, people will want to speak. I've learned it's a good idea to allow them a voice, even when the issues seem minute. People who are not given an opportunity to express themselves will not feel needed and will leave the group.

On the other hand, allowing the discussion to go unimpeded isn't wise, either. I try to keep the goal of the meeting in mind. When the discussion starts to go off course, it is my responsibility to bring it back to the issue at hand. Here again, I see the importance of doing my homework. If as leader I am not sure of our objective, I will never know when the discussion has lost sight of it.

## HOW TO LEAD A COMMITTEE

Various strategies can refocus our attention. One effective approach is to use questions, sometimes even as straightforward as, “Do we then want to approve the issue?”

### Watch the Clock

Losing sight of the time can throw even the most organized chairperson. When an issue unexpectedly consumes more than its share of the docket, I try to have it tabled for further research. Most decisions will not suffer from being deferred a week or two. Normally, better insight from further study strengthens a decision.

Keeping strict control of the time indicates the chairperson is in control, and that produces confidence in the proceedings. It also shows concern and compassion for the participants—especially those who are parents.

As chair of a committee, I may have to decide whether an issue can be resolved or should be tabled. If one person is camping on one point, I try to work around that point and move toward resolution. But if the discussion is widespread and ranges over a variety of points, the issue probably should be tabled.

### Pressing for Decision

Meetings present opportunities for group decisions. As chairman, my concern is to know when to call for a vote. One indicator is a lack of questions. Unless I sense an unhealthy hesitancy to bring up questions that need asking, I don’t keep pressing for questions if there are none. We proceed to a vote.

More common is the occurrence of repetitious questions. When the same questions are being asked more than once, I must decide whether the issue should be deferred or brought to a vote.

Since a decision is usually the culmination of a meeting, once a vote has been taken and recorded, I quickly move on to the next issue. If there is no other issue, I close the meeting.

—MICHAEL HARBIN; copyright © 1989 Christianity Today. Originally appeared in LAY LEADERSHIP.

### Discuss

1. How have you seen the principles above used effectively in other leaders?
2. Which of the behaviors above—preparation, firmness, timeliness, or decisiveness—do you need to develop most?
3. Do the agendas we currently use set us up for successful meetings?

**HOW TO LEAD A COMMITTEE****Cultivating Productivity**

*Make sure these practices are a part of your committee-meeting repertoire.*

1 Peter 5:1–4

Meetings bring out the best—and worst—in us. Egos, hidden agendas, poor planning, aimlessness, temper tantrums, and boredom can all come into play. But, on the other hand, meetings can be a showcase of grace, courtesy, vision, planning, enthusiasm, and hope.

Ministry purrs along or screeches to a halt in committee meetings, business meetings, staff meetings, board meetings, or training meetings. They either multiply your time, like a compact car getting 50 miles to the gallon, or devour time and energy, like a gas-guzzling, exhaust-belching bus. Here are three ways to run an effective committee meeting:

**Information and Empowerment**

Start board meetings with five to ten minutes of reports on good things that are happening in the church. I empower people with vision, motivation, enthusiasm, and faith. We celebrate that, through Christ, our church is winning and that each person in attendance is part of the reason why.

Discipleship is another necessary part of empowerment, but we don't take time for it in our regular board meeting. My board meets once a month for discipleship. We eat breakfast for the first 30 minutes and then move to Scripture study, prayer, and discussing our personal lives.

**Brainstorming, Information Gathering, and Discussion**

What I call “study items” take about an hour and fifteen minutes of our board meeting. We make no decisions on study items. Some issues will remain study items for months.

Regular board meetings don't provide enough time for everything that needs attention. Sometimes we take retreats as a board and brainstorm on several big issues. We don't use this time to make decisions, just to glean ideas.

**Decision Making**

This is my last priority at board meetings. We end with two to five minutes of what I call “action items.” These have been study items in previous meetings that we're ready to vote on.

Voting is not a big deal at board meetings because I know before I go in what the vote will be—unanimous. I know ahead of time because of the process outlined here.

—JOHN MAXWELL; copyright © 1993 Christianity Today. Originally appeared in *The Time Crunch*.

**Discuss**

1. In what areas are our boards productive? In what areas are they unproductive?
2. What ideas from the article above could we incorporate into our meetings?
3. How could discipleship transform our board?

## HOW TO LEAD A COMMITTEE

# How to Judge an Idea

*Use these five methods to evaluate proposals.*

Proverbs 3:21–26

*A good idea doesn't always pass through a board on its merit alone. People need convincing, and ideas need explanation. Before proposing a new idea, or when you hear a new idea proposed to you, ask these questions. They can unearth the underlying issues that need consideration.*

### Is the Idea Spiritually and Doctrinally Sound?

While our denomination's—or local church's—book of rules and regulations may never be canonized as the inspired Word of God, we do need to respect the doctrines and policies of the church we represent.

*Ask: What biblical and theological issues does this proposal touch on?*

### Is the Idea Well Researched, the Implications Thought Through?

One board member thought it would be great to have a charity luau. After the “yeas” died down, committees were assigned to turn the fellowship hall into a tropical paradise, to publicize the event, to sell tickets, and even to dig a pit in the back lawn for the pig barbecue—until the health department sent a stern letter to the pastor noting that local health codes prohibited such an event.

*Ask: Who do we need to work with in our church to accomplish this task? Who in our community or local government?*

### Is the Idea in Good Taste?

One of the highlights of a youth ministry I once worked with was the annual haunted house. Our director and his staff went all-out to provide enough theatrical blood and guts to make even Stephen King squeamish. Eventually, however, the organization's leaders decided that mutilated bodies were not the best publicity for a Christian organization. The idea had attracted huge crowds, but perhaps at the expense of good taste.

*Ask: What are the risks in terms of tastes and local attitudes? Is it worth it?*

### Is the Idea Ethical?

A great idea delivered in a deceptive manner does not help the church or extend the ministry. Great ideas are honest about what they're meant to accomplish.

*Ask: Will this idea hurt, offend, or leave anyone feeling tricked?*

### Will the Idea Have Wide-Based Support?

Some churches host rummage sales. Others Las Vegas nights, or selling pizzas door to door, to fundraise for an event. Others—especially youth groups—toy with ideas of concerts, parties, or dances. When considering such ideas, I have to lead my committees to weigh whether the idea would be harmful to the unity of our church.

*Ask: Should we expect reasonable opposition to this idea?*

—JAMES WATKINS; adapted from *Communicate to Change Lives* by James Watkins (Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007).

## Discuss

1. How can questions like these simplify committee work, especially for the leader?
2. Rank each of the questions above with regard to the importance they have for our committee work.
3. Based on experience in our church, what are some questions we should add to this list?

**HOW TO LEAD A COMMITTEE****Lead Your Board to Worship**

*It is possible to find fulfillment and serve on a committee at the same time.*

Psalm 95:6–7

*Many people end their term on a committee worn out or, even worse, bitter. But serving doesn't need to induce cynicism. It can actually produce growth. Leaders make the difference.*

I believe board meetings can become worshipful work, and I've devoted several years to working with a group of churches to integrate spirituality into their board meetings. Making the boardroom a place for spiritual growth calls for a change in how we approach our work. Here are four practices that enrich a board.

**Storytelling**

Stories provide a clear identity. Stories bring life and energy. Stories draw out commitment, form community, and illuminate personal characteristics and gifts. Often, storytelling during a board meeting can clear the air and aid listening, speeding up discussion on issues.

**Biblical and Theological Reflection**

I remember one board that was affected by the baptism of Mikey, the 12-year-old disabled son of a family in the church. The day of Mikey's baptism, the congregation was caught off guard when, while being baptized, Mikey burst into a loud, joyful laugh.

The board later met and reflected on the similarities between the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 and Mikey's baptism. These reflections ushered in a time of sharing, learning, and reflection among board members that helped them grow closer to God and one another.

**Prayerful Discernment**

Prayerful discernment can turn the board into a center of worshipful work. This method of seeking God's will engages all members of the board in prayer before seeking a tangible outcome. Of course, not every decision can be put to such a lengthy process. But key decisions should be put through this course of action.

In one church in which I have witnessed this process, critical issues were addressed like this: each person prepared a brief statement on the proposal and presented it to the rest of the board. No debate or discussion occurred. Each then went home and prayed. A few days later they gathered and sought a decision.

**Visioning the Future**

I have conducted a number of retreats for church boards. Halfway into the retreat, I often detect a sigh of relief—most people are relieved to find I don't expect them to list all the goals for the coming year. Goals rarely become reality. Instead, once a year, I have the leaders focus on vision—what the church does well, and how it can shape its future around the congregation's strengths.

—CHARLES M. OLSEN; copyright © 1997 Christianity Today. Originally appeared in *Growing Your Church Through Training and Motivation*.

**Discuss**

1. What are some stories of how God has worked in our church?
2. What are some key issues or topics that we should address with “prayerful discernment”?
3. What are some of our goals? What is our vision? Why is it important to separate the two?



**HOW TO LEAD A COMMITTEE****When Not to Press for a Vote**

*Sometimes, making a decision is the wrong choice for a committee.*

Proverbs 29:20

Discussion nourishes group decisions. At times an issue may be so clear and the group so united that discussion is needless. But other times a group is reticent. How does the chairperson determine which is the case? Here are six indications that more discussion is necessary before making a decision.

**No Comments**

Usually, even when the group is united, there will be several comments reflecting this unity. When nothing is said, I sometimes ask one or two key individuals “How do you feel about this?” to get the discussion started.

**A Private Dissenter Remains Silent**

Usually when I do my homework, I develop some idea of the members’ various positions. I discern who is opposed to a certain proposal. If these private persuasions are not spoken publicly at the proper forum, I feel free to ask individuals for their comments.

**Blank or Questioning Looks**

Quizzical expressions tell me there are unresolved questions. Again, I feel free to “pick on” a couple of the people who seem doubtful, asking them if they have any comments or questions.

**Deep Contemplation**

A person who seems lost in thought (assuming he is awake) is often pursuing some issue that has not been presented. I frequently will ask, “John, you seem very thoughtful. Do you have something to offer?” Often these individuals hold back unless they are specifically called upon.

**Key Issues Are Not Discussed**

All the key issues surrounding a certain idea will normally be covered in the main presentation. Sometimes, however, the follow-up discussion shows that the key point was misunderstood. In such a case, I try to address the issues before a decision is made. I’ll often do it by asking specific questions regarding misunderstood aspects.

**Feeling**

There are times when I am just not comfortable calling for a vote. For whatever reason, the group doesn’t feel ready. When this occurs, I’ll say, “That seemed awfully easy. Is everyone happy with the presentation?” As I ask a general question like this, I watch faces for other signs that further discussion is necessary.

Monitoring these indicators has helped us avoid premature decisions that would have, in effect, decided nothing. Only a group ready to vote can vote conclusively.

—MICHAEL HARBIN; copyright © 1988 Christianity Today. Originally appeared in LAY LEADERSHIP.

**Discuss**

1. Why should a board take enough time on an issue, even if it is definitely going to pass?
2. Describe a time when a vote went through that should have been given more time.
3. Which of the indications above are you most familiar with?

**HOW TO LEAD A COMMITTEE****Improving Group Dynamics**

*Leaders can strengthen their committees by removing these obstacles.*

Ephesians 4:1–3

*Most of the divisiveness within a board is not rooted in the board members themselves. It is rooted in the board's structure. Many groups simply set themselves up for failure. Here are four structures one church needed to address in order to step forward.*

**Meeting in the Wrong Place**

When I first came to the church, our monthly board meetings took place in my office—my refurbished garage. The chairs were uncomfortable. The lighting was poor and the room a little cold. Then one day, in desperation because of how poorly the meetings were going, I suggested we meet in my living room. It was a transformation. Rather than squaring off across a table, we now sat on couches and chairs. When meetings were over, people began to stay and talk rather than quickly leave.

There are times when it is best to meet around a conference table, particularly when we want to focus on a specific task. Yet most of a board's work can be completed effectively in the more intimate setting of a home.

**Not Enough Focus on Relationships**

Cultivating trust in the absence of quality relationships is extremely difficult. A tendency to downplay relationships can erect a roadblock to unity. Even opportunities for casual conversation lay the groundwork for a deepening appreciation and understanding of one another. As relationships develop, a sense of trust and unity will follow.

**Not Enough Meetings**

In our busy world, the last thing most people want is another meeting. Committee members are no exception. But researchers of group dynamics have discovered an important principle: Whenever a group of people increase the amount of interaction with one another, there is a corresponding increase in their regard and appreciation for one another.

**Careless Selection Process**

In our early days, we focused exclusively on spiritual qualifications for board and committee members. While those are still primary, we have begun to ask new questions: What effect will this person have upon the unity of our board? How will this person fit in with the ministry team we've developed?

This does not mean potential board members must agree with everything the board has previously decided. It does mean they must be in agreement with the basic thrust of the current ministry.

—LARRY W. OSBORNE; adapted from Leadership journal, copyright © 1986 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit <http://www.leadershipjournal.net/>.

**Discuss**

1. How could a more comfortable environment improve the interactions on our boards or committees?
2. What are some ways that our committees could demonstrate a stronger commitment to relationships?
3. What qualifications—beyond the spiritual—are important for our committees?

## HOW TO LEAD A COMMITTEE

### Common Conflicts

*Watch for strife at these flashpoints.*

Galatians 5:22–25

*Committees are often places of conflict. In this article, a veteran pastor reflects on what's behind the board conflicts he's experienced.*

#### Confusion About Goals

A pastor or leader might think, *I explain where this church is going and often review how we can get there, but my board members don't seem interested.* A member of his board might be thinking, *I wish the pastor would tell us what we are trying to do as a church. I don't see the big picture.*

#### Training and Discipleship

Pastors often declare, "I wish my board would take the reins of leadership, but they seem reluctant to accept training, especially from me." To this, some board members might silently respond, *Our minister says he'd like us to be more involved in leadership, but he's not just efficient, he's super-efficient. How could I ever help someone as skilled as him?*

#### Traditional vs. Contemporary

A youthful leader often wants the church to address today's needs in today's terms. With vigor, he presses the issue of being up-to-date, which touches music, style of worship, pulpit vocabulary, programming, and other long-standing "untouchables."

A board, lacking confidence in young leaders and fearing the unknown, may balk: "Why can't our preacher just preach the Word, visit the sick, marry and bury, and do the basic stuff? Before we know it, we'll lose our older members."

#### Desire to Know One Another

A leader might sigh, "I realize our relationship would be more productive if I could *really* get to know the people on my committee, but somehow it doesn't get done."

A lay leader might be thinking, *I would give anything to know my pastor better. But who am I to take his time? He's always so busy, plus he has a lot of other people who need his help. And if he did get to know me, he might not respect me as much.*

—CHUCK SWINDOLL; copyright © 1997 Christianity Today. Originally appeared in *Leading Your Church Through Conflict and Reconciliation*.

#### Discuss

1. How have we seen these conflicts surface in our experience with committees?
2. What are some practical ways of addressing each conflict in committees at our church?
3. What is one other source of conflict on the committees in our church? How can we address that conflict?

## HOW TO LEAD A COMMITTEE

# Not Committees, but Communities

*Lifeless committees should be replaced by communities empowered by mission.*

Galatians 6:2

*Committees often lose energy and fall short of their potential. But they don't have to. Below, Roberta Hestenes explores reenergizing committees with a fresh dose of "mission." The outcome is a mission-focused community, and she identifies it in five areas:*

### Commitment

For the average committee member, commitment means, "I come to meetings and respond to anything I'm supposed to vote on." The traditional time commitment is inadequate—usually two to three hours, once a month. In a mission-focused community, members are committed to the growth and success of the programs.

### Frequency

A committee usually meets according to a set calendar. A mission-focused community, on the other hand, meets as often as is necessary to get the task done.

In one church I know, a new chairman took leadership of a stagnant evangelism committee. Shortly after, he announced that he would quit unless the committee took the lead and became active in evangelism personally. The group accepted the challenge and became a mission community. Sometimes they met for a whole day at a time. Sometimes months passed without a meeting, because the group had no need to meet, but they always kept in touch. Each person grasped what needed to be done and did it.

### Calling

In the traditional system, a nominating committee would have put Saul, the tent maker from Tarsus, on the maintenance committee. Men like Saul will cheerfully do this work, but they need a way to discover other gifts. Mission communities, on the other hand, form in response to real needs and are staffed by people who have chosen that mission personally and whose gifts and calling determine their roles.

### Responsibility

Traditional committees often separate authority from responsibility, and this is deadly. Committee members end up with a low sense of responsibility for their decisions, while those who do the work often lack authority needed to make responsible decisions. Mission-focused communities, on the other hand, tend to keep responsibility and authority close together.

### Uninvited Guests

There are always guests at a conventional committee meeting: our brains and our seats. We are supposed to bring ideas and information and sit as long the meeting runs. The uninvited guests are our emotions, family problems, and personal concerns.

In a community, there are no uninvited guests. The whole person is invited. Mission-communities take time to catch up with each other, pray for needs, and then go on to business. Before we do business, we need to know who is here—physically and emotionally—and what we have to work with.

—ROBERTA HESTENES; copyright © 1997 Christianity Today. Originally appeared in *Growing Your Church Through Training and Motivation*.

### Discuss


1. What are some practical ways to implement each of the above on a committee?
2. How can a leader ensure that a committee is mission-focused?
3. What are the committees in our church that already embody these principles? What are the committees that need to do more in this area?

## HOW TO LEAD A COMMITTEE

# Further Exploration

## Deck

**BuildingChurchLeaders.com**. Leadership training resources from Christianity Today.

- :  [www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com](http://www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com)
- “Developing Leadership Gifts” Assessment Pack
- “Organizing a Church Board” Best Church Practices
- “Church Board Member” Orientation Guide
- “Becoming a Great Church Board” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Decision Making” Training Theme and PowerPoint
- “Leadership Styles” Training Theme & PowerPoint
- “Leading from Your Strengths” Training Theme & PowerPoint

**LeadershipJournal.net**. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

**Building Effective Boards for Religious Organizations: A Handbook for Trustees, Presidents, and Church Leaders** *Thomas P. Holland and David C. Hester, eds.* This book, based on extensive research, focuses on the role and responsibilities of non-profit organization boards, and offers practical advice on increasing communication and effectiveness. (Jossey-Bass, 1999; ISBN 978-0787945633)

**Leading Leaders: Empowering Church Boards for Ministry Excellence** *by Aubrey Malphurs.* This book is written by a church leader to provide comprehensive training to board members. (Baker Books, 2005; ISBN 978-0801091780)

**Meetings That Work: A Guide to Effective Elders’ Meetings** *by Alexander Strauch.* This book provides a short and practical examination of how to improve board meetings. (Lewis & Roth, 2001; ISBN 978-0936083179)

**Robert’s Rules of Order** *by Henry M. Robert III et al.* This is a concise and widely regarded methodology for conducting business meetings. (De Capo Press, 2004; ISBN 978-0306813542)

**Simply Strategic Stuff: Help for Leaders Drowning in the Details of Running a Church** *by Tim Stevens and Tony Morgan.* This light-hearted book offers a practical, funny guide to church management, and may be particularly helpful to churches managing growth or transition. (Group Publishing, 2003; ISBN 978-0764426254)

**Spiritual Leadership: Principles of Excellence for Every Believer** *by J. Oswald Sanders.* This book is a classic guide for growing godly leaders (Moody Publishers, 1994; ISBN 978-0802467997).

**Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders** *by Charles M. Olsen.* This book offers a four-point program of spiritual formation for board members. (Alban Institute, 1995; ISBN 978-1566991483)