

CHAPTER 12: SELECTING COMMITTEE CHAIRS

"The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and the self restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they are doing it." - Theodore Roosevelt, 1858-1919.

A good leader knows that running an organization effectively depends on getting other members involved in a committed team effort. The most efficient method is to create or use existing committees to focus and carry out particular tasks and then to choose skillful committee chairs that will energize and move forward with projects.

Here are some tips for selecting the best committee chairs:

1. **Assessing Your Needs.** You should start with taking assessment of your current situation. Have your current committee chairs been doing a good job? Do any of your current committee chairs want to be reappointed? Or have certain committees lacked strong leadership over the past year? Did your committee have a plan of action from the year before? If so, you should review each committee's plan of action to see whether they have met their goals.
2. **Where Do You Find Quality Committee Chairs?** If you determine that you are going to need to appoint a new committee chair, a good place to start with is the current and past officers, board of directors, or retiring committee chairs who may have recommendations. You may decide to tap candidates with proven track records such as current committee vice-chairs who have been active and "know the ropes."
3. **What About the Yet-to-be-Discovered Committee Chair?** There is always room for that unknown outstanding committee chair that has not yet come to your attention. Ask around for members who are looking to get involved but may not know whom to approach or may be intimidated being the new attorney in town. You may want to seek out underrepresented lawyers such as government, solo, or minority bar attorneys. Your bar association may also have events which naturally tend to draw budding young leaders. For example, the Dallas Association of Young Lawyers has a Leadership Class each year in which young lawyers interested in getting involved in the association enroll in the class and pay tuition to cover the costs. Through a full day class and several short meetings over six weeks, the participants learn about the DAYL, as well as other bar associations, local government and charity work. Each year, the DAYL obtains 15 to 20 new committee chairs directly from the Leadership Class. Other events could include: asking for volunteers in annual email or print surveys that are sent out to each young lawyer; recruiting at social events or swearing in ceremonies; and soliciting your members in newsletters and/or by e-mail. *Reminder: As you are recruiting, be sure to ask members to always list at least 3 committees on which they would be interested in serving in order to give you the most flexibility for making appointments.

4. **Appointing Veteran vs. New Members.** It is important to get a mix of people (government, firm, solo practitioners, seasoned, fledgling) on your committees to keep them alive as young lawyers age-out or move on to other projects. Some bar associations create co-chair positions to tackle this problem instead of having only a single committee chair position. Each committee consists of at least one veteran member co-chair and one new member co-chair to ensure that the project has continuity from year to year and that the project does not overwhelm the new member. Members also know that once they are on a committee, it is likely that they will serve on that committee for a few years and see how everything fits together behind the scenes. And thus, when they eventually rotate up into the co-chair position, they have a good grasp of what effort is involved.
5. **Creating Attractive Committee Chair Positions.** Members may be reluctant to serve as committee chairs because of the time commitment or the difficulty involved. Persuading that member to serve as a chair may be easier if you can show them that the task is not so arduous. In some bar associations, each committee maintains a notebook of records that is passed down to the next committee chair. This cuts down on the time “reinventing the wheel” and takes away a lot of the guesswork from what is expected each year.
6. **Supporting Your Committee Chairs.** You should make the extra effort to consult your committee chairs as to who they would like to co-chair the committee and who their committee members will be (if this is feasible). This forms a dialogue in which the committee chair knows that he or she is part of the decision making process and that you are there to assist, but not to run, the committee. You can also support your committee chairs by citing their committee’s progress and accomplishments in your newsletter and during board meetings; making extra funds available if a good project requires more funding; and acknowledging at the end of the year that your successful year rested on the work of the committee chairs.
7. **Rewarding Committee Chairs.** Honoring your committee chairs with recognition is important to the team dynamic and it maintains a sense of purpose. Sometimes the recognition can be as small as sending an e-mail with positive feedback or a quick note of appreciation, or telling them one-on-one that you appreciate their work. These seemingly slight gestures actually have great impact since they reinforce the fact that you believe the committee is important. In return, members become more motivated to complete the task.
8. **Meeting Personally with Committee Chairs before the Start of the Bar Year.** The most effective committee chair is one who is committed to a quality bar year. Many committee chairs may not be aware of the mechanics of leading a bar association and you should meet with them individually in person or by phone to discuss the bar year, budget process, plans of actions, meetings and disbursement of money. A letter explaining the committee chair’s duties is not an adequate substitute for this one-on-one contact. However, a follow up letter after the initial contact is an effective tool. During this meeting, you should request that the committee chair

submit a plan of action for budgeting purposes. A few weeks later, it may be wise to schedule a planning meeting for all your committee chairs in which all of you can brainstorm for projects, set a master calendar of events, and the appropriate deadlines for reports. You may also want to stress your personal agenda as Chair for the year and get a personal commitment from them to assist you in your agenda.

9. **Replacing Inactive Appointees.** Although young lawyers are volunteers, the inactivity of a committee chair should not prevent the rest of the committee from moving forward. Because it is difficult to have an effective bar year with inactive committee chairs, you may encounter a need to “fire” a chair as a last resort. To evaluate the situation and measure performance, you should first review the plan of action and see whether there is an alternate course of action. Perhaps you may be able to avoid a firing by soliciting assistance from another committee member or appointing a co-chair, which could help out an overburdened chair. Most people do not like to admit failure and if you allow them the opportunity to relinquish their duties gracefully, they may agree that their plate is too full and will step aside.

Although selecting, maintaining and supporting your committee chairs seem to be a lot of work, it is well worth the time and effort. If committee chairs are well-established at the beginning of the year, committees will generally run themselves. Their importance to a good bar year cannot be overstated.

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