

Despite reputation, committees will stay

If you're over the age of 15, you probably belong to a committee. More likely, you serve on several. And you'd rather you didn't.

Committees have a terrible reputation for wasting time and accomplishing little, concedes Prof. John E. Tropman of the University of Michigan School of Social Work. Whether formed within Congress or the neighborhood garden club, they are often hampered by weak management, poor attendance and obscure goals.

Why, then, do people keep creating and joining them?

"It's in the American character," Tropman believes. "We insist on participatory democracy rather than vesting all authority in one person."

"Also, while the voting system allows us to express feelings for or against an issue, the committee provides an outlet for those of us who feel intensely about that issue or who have a special interest to protect."

"Finally, society has become so complex that relying on one decision-maker is impractical. The people with information are frequently different from the people in power. It is necessary to establish a vehicle in which both can work toward a single goal."

Committees are here to stay, Tropman asserts, no matter how poor their image or their track record. Thus he has compiled "The Essentials of Committee Management," co-authored by Elmer J. Tropman and U-M

social work Prof. Harold R. Johnson. It will be released early in 1978 by Nelson Hall Publishing House of Illinois.

The book covers all facets of committee functioning, from the organizational stages through policy implementation. The roles of the chairpersons, officers, members and staff are outlined, as are the mechanics of preparing meeting space, assembling working materials and insuring a high attendance.

"The main reason many committees work poorly," Tropman believes, "is that the participants simply don't know what to do. The fault usually lies with an inept chairperson, for heading a committee requires an energetic combination of administrative skills, commitment, initiative and impartiality."

On the other hand, he says, even the most capable chairperson can be saddled with a vague directive, such as "improve working conditions," or with a passive, unreliable membership. The new book presents some guidelines for eliminating the most common problems or preventing them from developing in the first place.

"Committees have become so commonplace that they are sometimes regarded as a trivial, almost comical aspect of our society. Yet as society grows more complicated, more and more coalitions are being formed to meet personal and institutional goals."

"Our purpose is to help these groups become more accountable and productive," Tropman says.

"For example, one of the many dilemmas facing the committee organizers is the selection of members—are they representative of the group they are serving? Will the inclusion of people with unique backgrounds and interests enhance the committee's work, or create conflict? How does one optimize participation of women, minorities and other groups who have been traditionally excluded from the decision processes?"

"Committees often spend enormous amounts of time seeking members with 'influence,'" Tropman notes. "Perhaps a more useful quality is responsiveness."

"It is ultimately the extent to which a committee is willing and able to work with constituent groups which determines its effectiveness."

Federal aid sought for road safety

The Oakland County Road Commission has applied for grants worth \$327,600 in an effort to increase safety of motorists.

The largest grant would be \$213,500 to cover 70 per cent of funding for upgrading Do not Pass and Pass with Care signs.

Under the program, during a two-year period, new highly-reflective signs would be replaced at 2,440 locations, improperly placed signs would be moved at 1,350 locations, and 150 signs would be eliminated.

The project seeks to place modern reflective signs on all paved roads in the Federal Aid Urban portion of the county road system that don't already have them.

Another grant would pay at least 90

per cent of a \$36,000 project to improve No Passing markings on pavements at various locations totalling 378 miles. Similar grants have been received during the past two years.

Also applied for is a grant for a second year of pavement edmarking at various locations and for varying distances totalling 1,261 miles at a cost of \$90,062. This program is also qualified for at least 90 per cent federal funding.

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