



Overcoming Committee Overload

Baha Habashy

Baha Habashy is a Partner with, Integrity+ Consulting - a firm focusing on Overcoming Work and Information Overload.

Adam's dream job was a career where he could have a significant impact on the lives of hurting people. Joining the hospital leadership team as Director of Public Relations was the closest thing he could see to achieving his goal. With a degree in public relations and a MBA, the healthcare system was a fertile opportunity for a self-motivated individual like Adam.

As his boss escorted him on the introductory rituals, Adam was flattered by the number of people who expressed interest in his talents. As soon as his e-mail account was established, he started getting invitations to join a variety of committees. He often questioned what contribution he could make to such committees. Discussing his concerns, his boss told him that being on committees is the best way to gain exposure and recognition in the hospital. Within six months of joining the hospital Adam found himself on fourteen different committees. Tired and overworked, he began to question his effectiveness and ask if he could really be making an impact on the lives of hurting people.

Do you know anyone like Adam?

In conversation with healthcare leaders some articulated their concerns in the following comments:



"Committees have a vital role to play in the healthcare system. At the same time I am concerned that sometimes leaders hide behind committees to avoid the responsibility of making decisions. The result of this leadership gap may be that we have too many committees that add little value." – **Mr. John McGarry, President and CEO, River Valley Healthcare System**



"The integration of clinical decision making often requires the input of professionals from many differing disciplines. The perceived need for consensus or shared risks often adds a heavy committee load to professionals who are already overloaded by their patient care demands." – **Ms. Wendy Gilmore, Vice President, Clinical Services, Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre**



"People often bring issues to committees that should be decided by leaders and managers. Some decisions often take much longer than they should especially when committees do not have clear decision making processes and criteria. All of this can lead to delays in making the appropriate decisions and increased operating costs." – **Mr. Dan Germain, Vice President and CFO, The Credit Valley Hospital**



"Process is vital to healthy committees. Training committee leaders on the application of good committee processes is essential. Most people learn from models. Some committee leaders do not provide good models. I am concerned about this because it has a very negative impact." – **Ms. Karen McDonald, Director, Learning Services, River Valley Health System**

What is the solution?

Diagram 1 illustrates a topical framework and a process that could help us discuss possible solutions. This framework will highlight key points that should be reflected in a Committee Charter or Terms of Reference. Further, candid discussions can help leaders enhance the effectiveness of their committees.

Value Proposition (VP)

No committee should exist without a documented VP reflecting its attributes and the value it brings. A well-stated VP must:

Clearly relate to and support the hospital values, mission, and business objectives.

Reflect how the committee differentiates itself from other existing committees and/or organizations within the hospital.

Committee Authority

The purpose of authority is empowerment and accountability. There should be no responsibility without authority and there should be no authority

Committee Effectiveness and Life Cycle Framework™

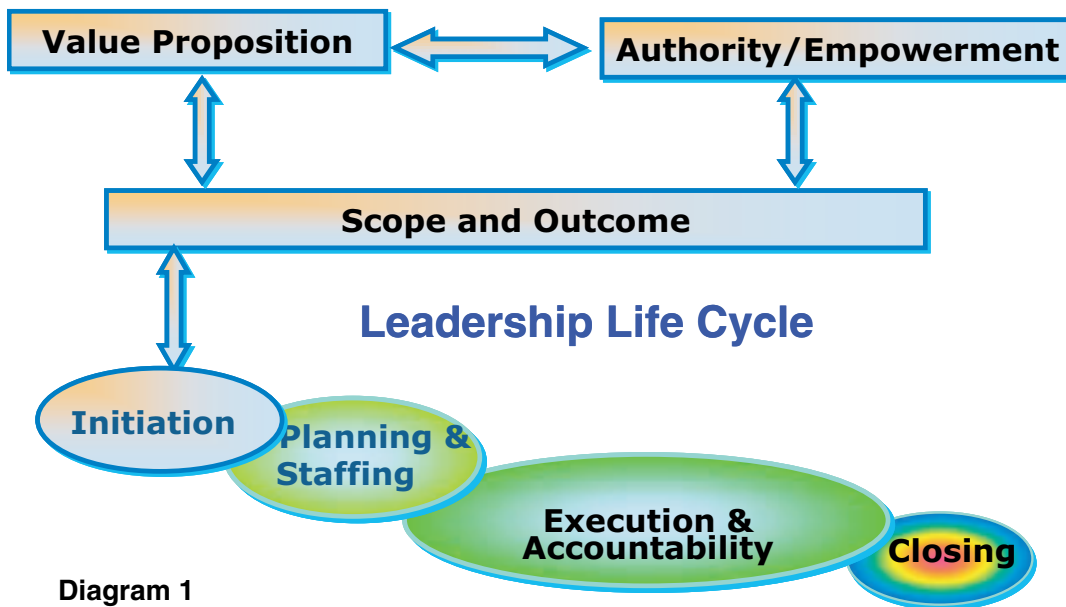


Diagram 1

without accountability. No committee should exist unless it has an appointed senior authority that supports its VP, is rewarded for its outcome, and empowers it to fulfill its mandate. The committee achievements should be part of its authority's performance measurement.

The committee should be totally accountable to its Authority who:

- Is responsible for its achievements and performance
- Approves its membership to provide the optimum mix of skills, competencies, authority, and ability
- Appoints only one Committee Leader who is accountable for its operation.
- The Committee Authority must meet at least once a month with the Committee Leader to provide support and to review its progress, issues, and concerns. This he/she should summarize to the senior leadership team.
- The Committee Authority must terminate the committee when its term expires or when its Value Proposition is fully realized or fails to materialize.

"At Mount Sinai Hospital we are seeking to improve committee effectiveness by trying to have all committees be accountable for specific objectives and goals that are clearly related to our Balanced Score Card Framework."

– Mr. Trent Dark, Director, Organizational Development, Mount Sinai Hospital

Scope and Outcome

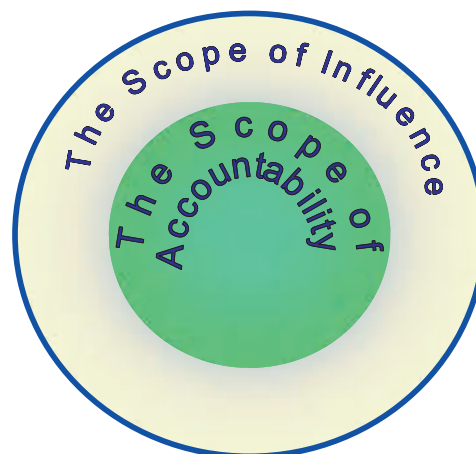
The committee must have a clearly defined scope. To ensure its focus the committee scope and outcome can be defined by:

- Scope of accountability that is the target of specific objectives resulting in tangible and/or non-tangible benefits. The scope of accountability must be documented and approved by the Committee Authority during the committee initiation phase.
- Scope of influence could include areas where the committee may have indirect impact or benefits but should not be included in its performance measurements.

The Committee Life and Cycle Process

From initiation to closing, the life of a committee is a trust in the hand of its leader and must be effectively managed. This way activities and expectations are clearly communicated and misunderstanding is strictly avoided.

The life cycle of a committee should not be longer than 12 months or the job performance evaluation period of its authority, whichever is less.



Initiation

Any business leader may call for the initiation of a committee but the initiation phase cannot start unless its vision and benefits capture the interest of a potential senior authority that would sponsor initiating an assessment of its viability.

This phase is a foundational investigating phase. Commitment to the initiation phase does not imply commitment to the committee.

The outcome of this phase should be documented as:

- A statement of explanation indicating the reasons why the committee existence is not viable or
- A Committee Charter or Terms of Reference that:
 - Announces the committee and confirms the Committee Authority
 - Appoints its leader. The committee achievement will be part of its leader's performance measurement.
 - Highlights the committee value and benefits to the organization and/or its key stakeholders
 - States the committee's scope and expected outcome
 - Defines expected tangible and non tangible benefits
 - Highlights possible costs and obligations
 - Anticipates critical success factors, risks, and risk mitigation options
 - Explains the roles and expectations of its members along with staffing guidelines
 - States the committee term and life expectancy
 - References the closing and termination plan

Planning and Staffing

During this phase the committee leader documents the Committee execution plan including:

- Confirmation of the committee scope and deliverables
- High level activity plan and smart goals
- Expected reporting and communication plans
- Expected closing and handover plan
- Staffing plan which reflects how each of the committee members can play an effective role in achieving the committee objective and goals
- The staffing goal should be to provide the optimum mix of skills, competencies, authority, and ability. The committee leader must ensure that committee staffing strictly avoids "title imposed roles" or be only based on organizational titles.

Execution and Accountability

During the execution phase the Committee Authority must support the committee leader and hold him or her accountable for:

- Motivating and maintaining appropriate committee staffing levels and avoiding meeting and work overload.
- Ensuring that committee members play their roles with excellence
- Ensuring positive collaboration among committee members
- Ensuring effective communication with key stakeholders
- Maintaining appropriate records of committee proceedings and communication
- Regularly reporting progress, issues, and concerns to the Committee Authority who in turn must similarly communicate to the senior leadership team

Closing

At the end of the committee term the committee leader must document:

- A summary of achievements and outstanding issues
- An assessment of the contribution and performance of each committee member. This assessment will be part of the participant's performance measurement.
- A list of lessons learned
- Recommendation for follow-up activities, committees, or projects

In many cases the mandate of the committee could be renewed. This is the case with many standing committees. If a continuation of the committee is recommended the committee authority should expect the same requirements as in the initiation phase.

What did Adam do?

With the above check list in hand Adam decided to meet with his boss to assess the many committees to which he had been drafted. This process highlighted the need for an audit of many of the committees where Adam participated. It also highlighted the need for training and modeling of effective committee leadership.

Armed with this, Adam was able to excuse himself from committees where he was less than effective and focus on well-run committees where he could make a significant contribution. As he modified his role and time investments, he began to realize the goal of improving the impact he has on the organization and having an impact on the lives of hurting people. ●

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Adam is a fictitious character. He is a representative of the many leaders I have met during my eighteen-year involvement with the healthcare system.