

“MANAGING GROUPS in the 21st CENTURY.”

by Gary Neat

In a world seemingly obsessed with leadership, the equally complex *committee* is a phenomenon which draws scant attention. Of course, leaders can be photogenic, good copy and charismatic, but whoever heard of a sexy committee?

Whilst for some of us there's a vicarious thrill when contemplating life without committees (or work groups, task forces, working parties, video conference groups etc. etc.) the reality is that without this most enigmatic apparatus, the essential dialogue, human interaction and innovation would cease within organisations.

Is it time then to re-think the ubiquitous committee ? Is it time to re-draw the boundaries to ensure no more wretched hours are spent listening to those committee-tragics obsessed by minutiae – yet oblivious to the group's impotence?

I'm philosophical enough to know that like democracy, a committee is an essential yet flawed concept. In fact, former British Prime Minister Clement Attlee might well have been talking about committees when he wrote *“Democracy means government by discussion but is only effective if you can stop people talking.”*

Truly effective committees or work groups empower participants to make creative decisions that benefit their organisations. Regrettably, however, the group dynamics of a committee ensures less willingness to take risks so a challenge for chairpersons is to engender a feeling of relevance amongst individuals. We all better respond to leaders whose outlook is positive and optimistic, who mobilise their energies to transform and challenge the status quo.

The Committee Chairperson is crucial. Much of their best work is often done between meetings by reaching consensus, empowering key players and deconstructing the personal issues which so undermine group dynamics. A chairperson in the early 21st century must have the requisite knowledge and relationship skills to feed the enthusiasm and innovation of their group. But, a cautionary note on consensus. If the objective is reduced to merely achieving universal agreement then any initiative or solution can be rendered so impotent as to be useless. Regrettably, that's often the case.

Not surprisingly, committees are more proactive when there's a profit-motive. Of course, you're not going to find that motivator in the public service or that other harbinger of committee doom – the university. Both areas are subject to inter-

departmental turf wars where meetings are almost a fetish and where process outguns results.

Committees and working groups will not become extinct. People will always have information and skills to share, authority to allocate and feedback to ascertain. What's changing are the dynamics whereby a more responsive organisational architecture is replacing "wallpaper" style committees – where self managing and more participative groups are replacing old style hierarchies.

Years ago an insightful business acquaintance asked – *“Gary, you really do hate committees don't you?”*. It was an accurate, yet motivating comment. I reasoned that as committees would no doubt forever plague my professional existence, a value-adding personal strategy would be to crystallise a workable model – a model where I would feel empowered, empower others and never lose sight of the objective.

Countless committees, boards and working parties later, my battle-scarred committee template is:

- **Focus – don't be distracted.**
- **Consume knowledge.**
- **Prioritise.**
- **Be emotionally robust.**
- **Empower others.**
- **Lobby behind the scenes.**

And, then there's my all-time favourite - *“omit to tell the committee psychopath that you're changing the meeting time”!*

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