A Law Librarian's Guide to Effective Committee Participation

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A Law Librarian’s Guide to Effective Committee Participation

Tips gathered from longtime committee members

By Elizabeth Outler

Law librarians volunteer to serve on committees in their profession, in the workplace, and in everyday life. The success of a committee depends on the leadership of the individual committee members and the leadership of the chair. However, we often don’t know how to play our role or how to best contribute to the work of the committee. Following are some tips for effective committee participation.

Why Volunteer?
Those new to the profession—and even many librarians with years of experience—sometimes do not understand why they should volunteer for committees. A familiar refrain in answer to this question is: for the pleasure (or even moral obligation) of giving back to the profession. However, many law librarians, following extreme belt-tightening in many workplaces brought on by the economic crisis of recent years, hesitate to take on extra responsibilities in addition to their job duties when they are already doing more than ever.

John Edwards, associate dean for information resources and technology, director of the law library, and professor of law at Drake University Law School, says that committee service provides an opportunity to enrich the profession, but it enriches us in the process, often in tangible ways. “The work you do on a committee not only benefits everyone but gives new members in particular a great opportunity to develop skills that will be invaluable throughout their careers. The diversity of opinion found on a national level, for example, provides a chance to sharpen skills necessary to reach a consensus and fulfill the charge of the committee.”

Building a portfolio of experience and skills that are unavailable within the parameters of one’s job description can be invaluable for librarians who want to move up. For example, working with a budget and supervising others are often requirements for management positions, but that type of experience can be hard to get unless you’re in a management position. Committee work frequently offers opportunities for members to manage budgets, run meetings, organize projects, and delegate tasks. Other types of valuable experience that people can gain through work on committees and task forces are writing white papers, presenting programs, and designing surveys. This is more than just resume filler; it’s meaningful work that makes committee members better professionals and helps them advance in their careers.

How to Volunteer
Select an area of interest or expertise that you have or want to develop. To some degree, committees are looking for volunteers, no matter what their experience, but the more important a committee’s work is or the broader its impact, the more important it will be for the committee’s members to have experience and expertise. You will need to develop a resume, of sorts, for getting appointed to committees on the national level. Assuming that is a goal, take a look at your qualifications and develop them if necessary by doing relevant work in the organization where you are employed, or start off volunteering in your chapter or in a Special Interest Section (SIS). Because there is a smaller pool of volunteers for those committees, it is easier to get appointed and start building a track record of service. You should be aware that you are building a track record, whether or not it’s intentionally crafted.

Personally, my track was built by accident, and in hindsight I realize that all my professional service was falling into line. The first committee I served on as a new librarian was the Southeastern Chapter of the American Association of Law Libraries (SEAAALL) Education and Publications Committee. At the end of
my two-year term on the committee, I was invited to serve as chair the following year. Around that same time, I was appointed to the Leadership Development Committee for the Florida Library Association, and shortly thereafter I was accepted to the AALL Leadership Academy. The following year I was appointed to an AALL committee for the first time, the Continuing Professional Education Committee, and after two years I was invited to serve as chair. At the time, I did not see myself as having any kind of expertise on continuing professional education, but looking back I can see how the pieces fit together. Since then, I have tended to find myself on committees focused on related areas—the Research Instruction and Patron Services SIS Program Committee, the Academic Law Libraries SIS Programs Committee, the Computing Services SIS Recruitment and Involvement Committee, and the SEAALL Scholarship Committee. It is definitely a better approach to be more intentional about your choices for committee service than I was early on. When submitting volunteer forms, you can put together your “resume” of service and explain how it fits together in support of your interest in serving on particular committees.

In preparation for writing this article, I conducted a survey of some AALL members who were identified as having experience with or some expertise about the nature of committee service and the traits of successful committee members and chairs. The survey was sent to active AALL members who have chaired more than one committee plus current members of the AALL Leadership Development Committee and Appointments Committee, the president-elect, and all available past presidents. The survey was sent to 140 people in all; 64 responses were received (45.7 percent). Some notable characteristics of the group were that 71 percent had been AALL members for more than 20 years and that more than half of the respondents had served on more than five AALL committees (one-third had served on at least 10 committees).

How to Prepare
Once you have been notified that you have been appointed to a committee, the first thing to do to prepare is to read the available information. Read the charge and any related documents that set out the guidelines for the work of the committee. In order to be a successful committee member, it’s crucial to understand the purpose and goals of the committee, the types of tasks that are generally performed, and the typical schedule for the work. Plan to set aside the time that will be required. If this information is not readily available, talk to committee members or former members about the schedule, the workload, and the nature of the work. Ask the chair about his or her expectations for the workload and the schedule. Make sure that your employer will allow you the time to attend conference calls and to work on committee projects and that the committee’s busiest times of the year do not conflict with your busiest times at work.

For AALL and chapter and SIS committees, plan to attend the Annual Meeting, if possible. In the survey of AALL committee volunteer superstars, many of these former chairs emphasized the importance of being physically present for that first committee meeting of the year. So much of the work of a national committee is done at a distance, virtually, that having a face-to-face meeting with the colleagues with whom you will work will make a big difference to you. “I think the lack of a sense of cohesion is my least favorite thing,” says Tracy Thompson-Praylucky, executive director of the New England Law Library Consortium. “You don’t really get to know one another because the majority of your work is virtual.” This was echoed by Lynette Louis-Jacques, foreign and international law librarian at University of Chicago Law School: “Being able to attend is key or finding ways to communicate and create community during the year some other way.”

Related to the ability to attend the Annual Meeting (if the committee is part of AALL or a similar national professional organization) is the need to be clear on your employer’s policies about committee service. For many law librarians, professional service is not just supported, it’s required. Others, however, may have to seek permission to attend conference calls or do committee work during business hours. If you have to negotiate for this time, be clear about the tangible benefits that your committee service will return to your employer for a relatively low cost—it will improve your skills and professional reputation, and it will broaden the reach and reputation of the firm or organization.

How to be a Good Committee Member
In the survey of repeat committee chairs, respondents were asked to rank 11 skills, characteristics, or behaviors of good committee members in order of importance. The compiled ranking revealed that the most important traits of a committee member are: (1) follow-through, (2) responsiveness, (3) listening skills, (4) timeliness, and (5) flexibility. The importance of the first two factors can be seen from the negative perspective, as well. When asked about their least favorite part of committee service, 42 percent referred in some way to committee members who don’t show up, don’t respond, don’t volunteer for assignments, or don’t deliver what they promised. As one anonymous respondent put it, the most frustrating part of working on a committee is “members who don’t pull their weight.” So to be successful on committees, the most important things to do are simple things requiring a bit of time management; that is, show up, answer emails, complete your assignments, and deliver them on time.

Another important trait is a pleasant and positive demeanor and an ability to “get along.” As noted above, survey respondents rated flexibility as one of the top five traits of a good committee member. Being able to adapt and work things out are key skills for working in a group. Along those same lines, many comments in the survey referred in some way to a need for positivity: an optimistic outlook, friendliness, courtesy, the ability to disagree or receive criticism without taking offense, energy and enthusiasm for the profession and the organization, collegiality, and good interpersonal skills were all mentioned. Similarly, many respondents placed a premium on openness to new ideas and willingness to listen, as well as an ability to collaborate and cooperate.

Quick Tips for Successful Committee Service

Make sure you have the time—ask permission and plan your schedule.

Know about your committee—read the charge and ask questions.

Show up, be on time, and respond to emails.

Be friendly and professional.

Do what you agreed to do; when you can’t get something done, communicate.
Understanding the Charge
The chair's first order of business is to be the master of the committee's charge. The chair must fully understand the charge and how it serves the strategic goals of the organization. The committee's success is measured by the degree to which it delivers on its assignment and meets the need for which it was established. Largely, this mission is found in the charge. It's understandable when committee members forget the rules or stray from the mission, but the chair must always be able to bring the group together to focus on guiding principles and any rules that have been established for the work of the committee.

Planning the Year
When survey respondents were asked to rank qualities of a good committee chair, ability to plan and ability to prioritize came out on top. In order to get the work done efficiently and on time, the chair must make a plan and see how it fits on the calendar. This is also important for communicating and managing expectations for committee members. If you want them to deliver what you need to get done, it's important to help them prepare by providing enough information as early as possible.

Prepared for and Conducting Meetings
If there was anything about which survey respondents sang in one voice, it was the need for preparing a meeting agenda and following it. When asked to provide advice for new committee chairs about planning and conducting meetings, nearly every respondent to the survey emphasized the importance of preparing an agenda, sharing it with committee members in advance, and sticking to it. Most survey respondents stressed that chairs are responsible for keeping the meeting on track and should be almost ruthless about sticking to the agenda. However, many also stated that good chairs know when to adapt the schedule to accommodate unexpectedly productive tangents and new ideas or critical issues that come to light at meetings. On the other hand, some respondents also stated that the correct way to address those types of unplanned topics was to table them for a later meeting and stick to the plan for the current meeting. Along with having a plan, respondents stressed the importance of knowing how much time the meeting should take and sticking to it. One way to manage time that was repeatedly advised is to share as much information ahead of time as possible so that members are able to come to the meeting prepared to work and not spend meeting time getting up to speed. Besides planning for the meeting and keeping the group focused and on time, it's important for committee chairs to be good facilitators. Sometimes committee members are good at moving things along without the need for a lot of work by the chair, but it's always important for the chair to pay attention to the possibility that viewpoints are not being voiced (or heard) and to be aware of the pitfalls of coming to consensus too easily or quickly. Chairs should encourage input from all committee members, including those who seem reticent or have a less extroverted style.

Introverts are not necessarily shy people; the common quality that introverts share is that they tend to need more time to be comfortable with voicing an idea or coming to a decision. "Introverted or reflective thinkers are not necessarily prepared to respond in the moment, which can do a disservice not only to them, but to the group as well," says Jay Kuhns, vice president of Human Resources at All Children's Hospital in Tampa, Florida, and author of the blog NoExcusesHR. According to Kuhns, introverted thinkers tend to prefer to voice their opinions to the meeting leader privately or after the meeting. But in an April 8 blog post titled "I Win Every Meeting," available at www.noexcuseshr.com/2013/04/i-win-every-meeting.html, Kuhns encourages committee chairs to focus energy on ensuring a proper balance of allowing "real time thinkers" to make contributions while coaxing the introverted thinkers into participating at the meeting. He says that meeting participation is simply part of the dues we pay for being in a group, so introverts must be encouraged and given space to speak up; to accomplish this, the meeting leader will often have to find ways to rein in those who over-participate and dominate the discussion.

One approach that is well known in management literature is the "Six Hats." In his 1985 book Six Thinking Hats, Edward de Bono describes this approach to getting creative and diverse ideas out of a team in a short amount of time while minimizing and defusing conflict. In his preface to the 1999 revised edition, de Bono summarizes the purpose of his system: "The main difficulty of thinking is confusion. We try to do too much at once. Emotions, information, logic, hope and creativity all crowd in on us. It is like juggling with too many balls." This can certainly be true in a group, in which members have different strengths and weaknesses, different comfort levels, and different styles of thinking and talking. It is extremely unusual to have all those voices and ideas operating in harmony, and even when they appear to be functioning optimally, the results can be disappointing.

Using de Bono's Six Hats approach, the team imagines that there are hats of different colors, each representing a different type of thinking. White represents neutrality, objectivity, and facts. Red is emotions. Black is cautious and careful, seeking to identify potential hazards and to spot the weaknesses in any proposal. Yellow is optimistic, hopeful, and positive. Green represents creativity, growth, and new ideas. Blue is the big picture, organization, and strategic thinking. The simplest description of the approach is to have everyone in the group wear the different thinking hats to approach each problem, using what de Bono calls "parallel thinking" to propose and discuss plans and ideas. With parallel thinking, everyone takes the same approach together; i.e., all members of the group "put on the white hat" at the same time. As everyone moves through the different modes of thinking, everyone will have the opportunity to be in and out of their comfort zones. The method pushes the group to generate new ideas from new perspectives while simultaneously honing in on innate strengths among members. It is also a straightforward way to generate contributions from group members who rarely speak up.

Another reason to try the six hats approach, de Bono argues, is that it saves a huge amount of time. Parallel thinking reduces or eliminates adversarial tendencies and the need to argue. Also, the hats walk the group through all the important parts of brainstorming and evaluating decisions and give the group everything it needs to make a decision. As de Bono says, if you are going on a road trip and there are several ways you can go and there is a road map laying out the roads, the traffic densities, and the nature of the road surface, then it is easy to choose the best road. The choice has become obvious to all. Exactly the same thing happens with the Six Hats method.

Another problem that chairs should watch for that does not often seem like a problem—especially when our focus tends to be exclusively on getting things done—is too much agreement. A good decision-making process doesn't require conflict, but it shouldn't allow members
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