

Advice for IT Advisory Committees

Observing a few key points will help you get the most from IT advisory committees at your institution

By William H. Pritchard

The EDUCAUSE Management Institutes, offered twice a year, are week-long, intensive management-development experiences. When the Institute ends, participants can continue to seek advice and support from their fellow participants and Institute faculty through a listserv provided by EDUCAUSE. Interesting questions are often asked, and the group provides opinions and helpful suggestions. One question from the class that was held during the summer of 2004 asked about campus IT advisory committees—how to create them, what guidelines to follow, what authority they should be given, and so on. Institute faculty member Willie Pritchard responded with some useful advice that I asked him to expand upon for this article.

—Cynthia Golden
EDUCAUSE Vice President

Advisory committees can be valuable to any part of the IT organization. The insights you can derive from such groups about perceptions of service levels and beliefs (or myths) about technology, as well as the interchange of communication between technical staff and users, can be helpful. But to derive the maximum value from advisory committees, keep several key points in mind.

First, note that advisory committees should not be confused with “project teams” and “work groups,” whose mission is quite different. Project teams or work groups often have a specific start and end time, with clearly stated objectives; for example, upgrade all desktop

computers to the latest operating system, replace the current e-mail server with new equipment, or implement an identity management solution. The membership of these groups tends to consist primarily of IT staff, with a few campus members who serve as functional advisors.

On the other hand, advisory committees tend to have a longer life span, possibly lasting for many years, and a diverse membership consisting primarily of campus representatives (faculty, staff, and managers) and only a few IT employees. (Those IT staff on the committee are likely to be managers or supervisors rather than front-line staff.) The committee may be institution-wide in scope or narrowly limited to certain departments or disciplines. Its primary goal should be to provide guidelines and policy on matters related to the use and implementation of technology in a specific functional area (discipline, department, college, university), not to provide technical specifications or requirements.

Often such committees can become highly political and difficult to manage if allowed to evolve without appropriate guidance and good communication. The following tips are intended as guidelines to help you use advisory committees effectively at your institution.

■ *Make sure that you have a clearly defined mission for the group and that every member understands it.*

If the group is to provide strategic direction, don't let them get bogged

down in day-to-day details of why something's “not working for me today.” If it's a policy group, keep them focused on IT policies, not on procedures. Setting the parameters up front and getting a clear understanding of what the mission is (and sticking to it!) are much easier than trying to turn around a group that's gone astray. It's often tough to help the campus representatives recognize the difference between their roles and their day-to-day issues. Reiterate the mission and operating principles of the group regularly and as necessary. Be sure to establish the mission and principles again at the beginning of each academic year. A formal “charge” to the group from the provost, president, or other campus executive can be useful in establishing and reinforcing the mission.

■ *Be clear about members' roles, particularly if the committee is intended to be a representative or governance group.*

Help members understand that they represent a larger constituency, not their own special individual interests, and that the committee has a greater goal to accomplish than taking care of their own interests. If your representatives come from each department within a school, for example, help them understand that the IT group serves all of them and therefore some compromises may have to be made to “serve the greater good.” Strongly advocating for a solution that only meets the needs of one department is not as valuable as a solution that addresses broader issues across multiple areas.

■ *Be clear about the term of membership.* For advisory committees to remain vital and useful, it is often best to set up specific terms for committee membership. Optimally, the members will have staggered terms so that there can be some continuity of understanding and philosophy from year to year. Technology can be complex and the policy issues surrounding it formidable to the uninitiated. It will take time for some to gain an understanding sufficient to provide informed and helpful input on policy issues—maybe a year or more depending on how often meetings are held and how productive the conversations are. Once your members have established that understanding, you don't want to lose it. I've found that a two-year term of office is just about right, if you can find people willing to make that kind of commitment. Any longer and stagnancy of thought can set in; shorter, and the value of the input may be lessened by a lack of understanding.

■ *Establish good working and communications relations with the leader(s) of the group(s) the committee members represent.*

If the committee is made up of faculty selected from the faculty senate, be sure to establish good relations with the academic senate president. If the committee consists of representatives from a specific college, department, or discipline, spend time in conversation with the dean or department chairperson. These good relations can serve you well when the time comes to find a replacement for a departing member or when you are having a particularly difficult time with one of the members. Seek the leaders' advice and consultation as needed and as appropriate.

■ *Recognize the value of two-way communication.*

Remember that the advisory committee members talk to others; this is an opportunity to "get your message out." At the same time remember that how you interact with the committee will be echoed throughout the groups being represented by those committee members. It's important to be impartial

and fair with all groups, as well as to over-communicate with them. Only part of your message will actually make it back to the constituency group accurately.

■ *As much as possible, try to keep advisory committees focused on the "big issues."*

The initial tendency for many first-time members of such groups is to get caught up in details, particularly if they are faculty. This comment is not meant to be pejorative, only to acknowledge that faculty, whether involved in teaching or research, are typically detail-oriented. They need to know what happened and what the result was, as well as what might happen if some variable is introduced into the environment. They love to speculate about all the possibilities of choosing a specific strategy or solution—which is what makes them great faculty but not necessarily productive committee members. In short, be patient with their natural inclinations but don't allow them to drive the meetings and the time you spend in communication. Run meetings with the priority of resolving issues and coming to conclusions; do not allow endless speculation about what will happen given certain scenarios. Meetings that descend to this level rarely accomplish much.

■ *Remember that, as a technology manager, your job is to aggregate all of the input and implement a strategy for moving forward.*

Your job as chair of the committee (and, I would advise that you always make sure an IT member chairs the IT advisory committee) is to build consensus on what the desired functionality is and then to develop your own strategies for getting to that solution. Try to avoid getting the committee too involved in determining the technical details of a particular solution. Often the committee members' opinions are based on the last thing they heard (or read on the airplane) or on what some outspoken person has said, even though it can't be implemented college- or enterprise-wide. In other words, make sure the solutions you and they agree upon are

what the functionality will be, not on a specific technical solution. (The religious battles between Mac and PC users, for example, often are unnecessary if you focus the discussion on functionality for the needs expressed.)

■ *Don't forget that you are the technology expert. As such, you often will be the one responsible for successful implementation of the policies emanating from the committee.*

Sometimes committee members can sound quite authoritative on what's technically best for a solution. If you are not knowledgeable about their discipline, it is easy to slide into accepting their assertions as gospel. Weigh each assertion against the challenges of implementation and support. Balance those assertions with practical, straightforward implications of each decision. "If we follow that policy, then we will have problems supporting [name your technical problem or who will be negatively impacted]."

■ *Don't be dogmatic in asserting your technical responsibilities; be willing to compromise when you can.*

The art of compromise is a careful balancing act between what must be done and what can be done. Recognize the difference, and recognize when something *isn't* required. Be willing to compromise on what can be done. The political capital you earn by such compromises can pay off in much bigger ways later.

Of course, many of the above recommendations are basic principles of good management and don't apply only to advisory committees. If you can practice these principles on a daily basis in your interactions with staff, faculty, and other managers, then doing so in technology advisory committees will become easy. The recommendations simply become an extension of your normal managerial behavior.

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