

## Effective Group Process for Libraries: A Focus on Committees

*One way of generating greater and more effective staff participation in library management is through the library committee. An investigation and reevaluation of the traditional library committee composition, functions, and performance is made applying management principles and group interaction theory.*

### INTRODUCTION

SINCE THE ADVENT OF THE 1970s, when librarians started to look seriously at management theory, many laudatory articles about the use of participatory management in libraries have appeared in library literature. Considering the democratic nature of the faculty committee structure, it is not surprising that some academic librarians have been quick to theoretically espouse this management style. In fact, for a number of years now, professional academic librarians have been echoing—or, in some cases, anticipating—this cry of participation in their bids for faculty rank and/or status. Recently, supportive staffs as well have been adopting this management lingo to express a desire for their share of “participatory management.” In a few academic libraries, the strong pressures for participation have forced the retirement or dismissal of a few “old-style” chief librarians, in hopes of replacing them with McGreggor-oriented managers.

Despite the frequent discussions of

possible staff participation, few writers have attempted to define how this participation by staff can be effectively implemented; there have been even fewer accounts of actual experiments in libraries with such management principles.

Rather than asking, as does most of the literature, “Will participation work or won’t it?” research should be directed toward asking “How can we make it work?” Knowledge of methods is important because some library staffs are on the verge of eruption and will settle for *nothing less* than that share in the decision-making process that library literature of the past few years seemed to be promising. Participation must go from the realm of theory into actual practice.

According to Argyris, there are at least six characteristics of “organic organization,” or the “participative group”:

- (1) decision making widely done throughout the organization,
- (2) an emphasis on mutual dependence and cooperation based on trust, confidence, and high technical or professional competence,
- (3) a constant pressure to enlarge tasks and interrelate them so that the concern for the whole is emphasized,
- (4) the decentralization of responsi-

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bility for and use of information, rewards and penalties, membership, (5) participants at all levels being responsible for developing and maintaining loyalty and commitment at as high a level as possible, and (6) an emphasis on status through contribution to the whole and intergroup and interindividual cooperation.<sup>1</sup>

This paper focuses on the first and fourth characteristics: the decentralization of decision making, and the decentralization of responsibility for decisions made, both as they are manifested in committee structure. The discussion, however, will necessarily overlap aspects of the other characteristics as well.

Jane Flener, in her article "Staff Participation in Management in Large University Libraries," recalls that committees and group work on a small scale have long been a part of the internal organization of academic libraries.<sup>2</sup> Although many librarians have probably participated in committee work either within the library, during their years of formal education, or in a social setting, few know how to get the best possible results from committee interaction. In order to expand the committee structure and make a wholehearted attempt at participation, an understanding is needed of (1) the effects of composition factors on committee work, (2) the "appropriate" functions of committees, and (3) the method of conducting a meeting which succeeds in drawing out the various resources that are the unique contribution of the committee basis of management. Referral is made to social psychology literature on group dynamics and effectiveness in group decision making.

#### GROUP COMPOSITION

##### *Status*

There are a number of patterns for committee composition in libraries, each serving a different purpose. First, there

is the departmental meeting, which fits well into the traditional, hierarchical framework. Similarly, but one step up in the hierarchy, there is the typical meeting of department heads with the upper level administrators of a library.

These methods of traditional grouping do not seem to decentralize the power base. Collins and Guetzkow (after subsuming department heads and administration under a "high power-status" category with their statement, "Formal designation as a leader, supervisor, boss, etc., will be a source of power"<sup>3</sup>) propose that "high power-status" persons will influence the committee process:

1. The power-status hierarchy will influence the flow and content of communication within the face-to-face group.
2. When there is an established power-status hierarchy, all group members will direct more communication to high power-status persons.
3. The content of communication from low to high power-status persons will depend on what the low-status person has learned is most likely to obtain reinforcement.<sup>4</sup>

Blau and Scott's findings corroborate these propositions:

1. Explicit status distinctions tend to reduce social interaction and social support.
2. Formally instituted status differences tend to undermine the process of competition for respect.
3. Status differences distort the error-correcting function of social interaction.<sup>5</sup>

Applying these propositions to the committee system with a traditional power structure, it would seem that subordinates' ideas and contributions would be subject to the same judgments and constraints that those subordinates meet in their everyday work. If a department head, for example, does not choose to

"pass on" a suggestion made by a person in the department, it will probably not be passed on, whether it was made on the job or in a departmental meeting. David Kaser's criticism of pyramidal administrative structure holds as well for pyramidal committee structure:

It is too easy for weak unit heads to filter communications both up and down the chain of command to the detriment of the enterprise. Such unit heads, it is said, report upward only those activities in their units that make them look good, and they are careful to hand downward no information that would enable members of their staff to threaten their positions or power.<sup>6</sup>

Again, many ideas may never even be expressed by the subordinate who feels constrained by his superior(s)—whether inside or outside the committee room.

One exception to this inhibition of subordinates by superiors is noted by Collins and Guetzkow: "Low power persons will be less deferential and less threatened when supported by their peers."<sup>7</sup> Thus, in eruptive situations, subordinates might risk the censure of their superior to voice a complaint or demand that has the support of the group, particularly if peers were physically present for support.

Still the high power-status person is ultimately in control of passing on or blocking the demand. The only way for an individual or group to contribute *despite* the departmental chairman is to go *outside* the given structure. The traditional committee set-up offers no alternatives to an employee whose efforts have been frustrated on a day-to-day basis. Although this typical committee might serve a limited informational function, it cannot greatly *expand* responsibility for decision making; the psychological and social constraints operating in the department also apply to the departmental meeting. For this reason it is important that there be stand-

ing and ad hoc committees across traditional boundaries to complement rather than parallel the traditional structure.

### *Heterogeneity*

The homogeneity of the traditional committee composition also tends to limit the quality of participation by subordinates. Some social psychologists have found that heterogeneous groups excel in solving problems where many alternatives are possible and varied resources are required.<sup>8</sup> Varied backgrounds and interests seem to produce a potential for a wide variety of solutions to a given problem and also aid in evaluating the quality of those solutions. A problem affecting many departments, for example, might best be handled by representatives from each concerned department through a joint meeting. On the other hand, if each department discussed the problem in its own closed meeting, solutions would tend to be reinforced by homogeneous input. When vested interests must interact on a common committee and interpersonal problems can be alleviated or controlled, the counteraction of bias should allow for objectivity.<sup>9</sup>

Heterogeneous composition could also apply to those committees in which participation is exclusively a function of the library's professional staff. Academic libraries often have an overeducated supportive staff, most with bachelor's degrees or some college experience. Given the disparity between the educational levels of the supportive staff and the low order of their tasks within the library, many seek to direct their abilities through participation in managerial decision making. Where supportive staff work more closely with the patrons than do most professional librarians, an important perspective is missed if their participation in library policy formation is denied. Similarly, although many supportive employees might be transient

members of the library staff, their job roles are relatively permanent, and these roles must be represented in personnel decision making. Library assistants and clerical employees may by definition be barred from campus faculty committees, but they should not be excluded from library governance.

### Size

A *Harvard Business Review* survey of 1,658 committees records the average committee membership as eight.<sup>10</sup> Yet, 79 percent of the respondents who answered a question on preferred size indicated that the ideal committee should have between four and five members. A. Paul Hare notes that

The ability of the observing individual to perceive, keep track of, and judge each member separately in a social interaction situation may not extend much beyond the size of six or seven. If this is true, one would expect members of groups larger than that size to tend to think of other members in terms of subgroups, or "classes" of some kind, and to deal with members of subgroups other than their own by more stereotyped methods of response.<sup>11</sup>

Collins and Guetzkow show the importance of focusing on interpersonal problems to facilitate group productivity.<sup>12</sup> In order to deal on an interpersonal level, members should not be seen "in terms of subgroups" or stereotypes. In addition, as Gibb's study notes, an increase in group size steadily increases the proportion of group members reporting feelings of threat and less willingness to initiate contributions.<sup>13</sup> Not only are interpersonal problems more difficult to cope with in larger groups, they also tend to be more abundant.

Other observations, however, made by Slater with groups of two, three, or four suggested that small group members are either too tense, passive, tactful, or constrained to work together sat-

isfactorily.<sup>14</sup> Slater concludes that

Size five emerged clearly . . . as the size group which from the subjects' viewpoint was most effective in dealing with an intellectual task involving the collection and exchange of information about a situation, the coordination analysis, and evaluation of this information, and a group decision regarding the appropriate administrative action to be taken in the situation.<sup>15</sup>

Although five may be the optimum number for interaction in a decision-making body, according to Filley, it is not clear that this size produces the best results on complex problems.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps if the group's task is to present a number of options in a consultative capacity on a complex task, a group of eight to twelve would be the most productive. But if the task requires effective interaction and eventual consensus in a limited amount of time, a small group is probably more appropriate.

### Personality

Bither's comparison of group effectiveness on complex decision-making tasks (the MARKSIM marketing decision game) with individual group members' personality traits (as scored on the Jackson Personality Research Form and Canon Social Intelligence Index) found positive relationships between:

- (1) the performance of the group and the traits of affiliation, exhibition, social intelligence, and social recognition;
- (2) the performance of the group and the variance on dominance;
- (3) a person's need-disposition traits and his tendency to take a leadership role in group interaction.<sup>17</sup>

Concerning the first correlations, Bither states

The results of this research suggest that the greater the degree to which individuals in a task group involved in complex decision making possess



skills that enable them to deal effectively with other group members, the greater will be the success of the group.<sup>18</sup>

The second significant correlation, between group performance and group members' variance on dominance traits, indicates that group effectiveness is facilitated when dominance traits are strongly concentrated only in a couple of individuals; or, conversely, group effectiveness is handicapped when none or all of the members of the group are high in dominance traits.

The third correlation was derived from a finding that persons voted as leaders by the members of a group were significantly higher on the trait scale scores of dominance, exhibition, social intelligence, and achievement than other members of the group.

Bither summarizes his study:

These findings do not suggest that personality is a substitute for ability. They do indicate that, when ability is either unknown or relatively equal among possible candidates for complex group task assignments, a consideration of the mix of personalities to be assigned to the group is likely to pay off in terms of increased group effectiveness.<sup>19</sup>

Although difficult to evaluate at this point, psychological factors constitute another important dimension to be considered in the area of group dynamics.

#### APPROPRIATE COMMITTEE FUNCTIONS

##### *Traditional Functions*

The various operations of committees as gleaned from the literature can be divided into eight general functions.

1. The brain-storming function. This generally refers to the creativity and productivity stimulated by interaction of individuals in a group.
2. The evaluative function. Varied attitudes and presuppositions of group members force individual

contributors to think out and justify proposed solutions; also, the different perspectives of group members allow them to see ramifications of solutions not identifiable to a single individual.

3. The coordinating function. As quoted in the *HBR* survey:

Committees are often the only way of coordinating all the functions of a business and bringing together minds that operate independently. By so doing each area can acquire an awareness of the others to balance the separate functions into a well-coordinated whole.<sup>20</sup>

4. The communication function. This includes the information and fact-finding roles of committees. Not only do different people naturally provide a variety of knowledge resources for the elucidation of a problem (and often for the enlightenment of group members involved) but they also offer a means for the division of labor so that much information can be gathered and shared.
5. The training-future-executives function. Committee participation is said to allow a potential executive exposure to "the problems, the requirements, and the contributions of other areas of the business," while giving him or her opportunity to develop a capacity for objectively analyzing and appraising situations in which he or she is not regularly involved.<sup>21</sup>
6. The morale function. Employees apparently will be more content with their jobs if they have an opportunity to participate in setting the directions and policies of the organization.
7. The consultative function. When a committee is limited to this function, it may operate in the ways de-

scribed above, but its conclusions serve only as input to someone else's decision.

8. The decision-making function. Elizabeth Stone's sixth point in her list of "values in relation to man and his work space" is that

. . . Power is seen not as a set quantity, but like capital, is susceptible to indefinite growth as it is shared. Participative management is emerging in which administrator and worker share powers of decision on the matters that directly affect the employee in his job situation, not only his welfare, but use of his talents.<sup>22</sup>

Of all these functions, only the decision-making function requires the use of power. In order for participatory management to increase employees' commitment to managerial decisions, the findings of Lawrence and Smith, and Edith Bennett, indicate that group discussion of a problem is no more inducement to future action than is a simple lecture on the topic.<sup>23, 24</sup> However, *decision* by a group regarding a future action effectively raises the possibility that such action will be executed.

#### *Expanded Functions*

1. Committee of the whole. Kaser suggests that large library policy matters be decided by a "committee of the whole," for

long-range goals and objectives, performance and service standards, and the monitoring of these standards would appear to be issues that any librarians' assembly would wish to reserve unto itself.<sup>25</sup>

Although the setting of "long-range goals and objectives, performance and service standards" seems to be an appropriate group activity for all staff, the size of most academic library staffs would

produce an unwieldy committee. Division of labor could be applied so that small committees could be set up to study goals and report their findings to the general assembly of librarians. This structure closely resembles faculty organization, with the head librarian serving an information function during deliberations and a review function after a decision has been reached.

Although such a format would enlarge the power base of an organization, it would be difficult to reach consensus; majority rule would probably have to be the adopted procedure. Time would have to be spent in the assembly in addition to time consumed in committee deliberations. Also, the individual commitment to and responsibility for any decision made in that large a group would probably be diminished. Finally, according to Gibb's findings, cited earlier, the amount of individual participation in such a large group would be minimized.

The advantage of this committee of the whole, however, is that it may lead to an actual diffusion of power. If the subcommittees are carefully chosen to represent varied staff opinion and interests, the head librarian might still serve only as a reviewer of the committees' decisions rather than the sole decision maker, thus delegating his authority and broadening the power base of the organization.

2. Personnel management. An area likely to benefit from varied input and creative solutions is personnel management. Although it may be necessary for a library administrator to supervise staff members under institutional guidelines, most staff members have the knowledge

and interest to make contributions in personnel management through group decision making.

3. Research group. Robert Haro recommends group approach to studying and initially instituting major change in academic libraries. Such a "Research Group" would be comprised of "representatives from academic teaching departments, a representative sample of managerial (preferably not "upper echelon" executives) and non-managerial librarians, and where appropriate or feasible, student representatives."<sup>26</sup> Haro's discussion of the functions of such a group is easily related to our developing conception of an effective group.

#### COMMITTEE PERFORMANCE

##### *Modes of Interaction*

Internal operations, as well as composition and functions, bear on a committee's effectiveness. A model for effective group interaction is provided by Van de Ven and Delbecq, who conclude that

the optimal combination of processes for creative problem-solving is: (a) use of nominal group processes for fact-finding and idea generation in the first phase; (b) structured group interaction . . . followed by informal discussions for clarification and evaluation of information, during the second phase; and (c) nominal group voting for final independent individual judgments in the final phase.<sup>27</sup>

The authors present this structured procedure for meetings to eliminate the problem of time-consuming, purposeless discussions into which meetings often evolve. Also, in an attempt to prevent interpersonal conflicts, Van de Ven and Delbecq curtail interaction as much as possible.

Nominal group processes encourage members to think carefully on the problems under discussion; but during final decision making, directed interaction

must be the primary tactic of any group. Nominal group voting may make such interaction all but superfluous.

A study made by Dean Barnlund compares the quality of decisions made by majority vote with those made by consensus of small committees comprised of people with similar abilities. The problems, drawn from the Bradley test of *Formal Validity in Problem Solving*, required that logical conclusions be selected for given arguments. He discovered that

1. Majority decisions, when deadlocks are evenly divided between right and wrong answers, are not significantly different from those made by the average individual and are inferior to those of the best member of the group working alone.
2. Group decisions, reached through cooperative deliberation, are significantly superior to decisions made by individual members working alone and to majority rule.<sup>28</sup>

Overuse of nominal group process where members have similar abilities may thus diminish the quality of decisions made, although this might not necessarily apply to other types of groups.

##### *Leadership*

Harrison Elliott's standard work, *How to Help Groups Make Decisions*, lists six "useful qualifications in the chairman":

1. Know the steps in decision making.
2. Have a reasonably alert mind.
3. Be open-minded and fair, not a protagonist for a point of view.
4. Have poise and self-restraint.
5. Be sufficiently well informed regarding the question under consideration to understand its main issues.
6. Be undisturbed by the expression of strong emotion in the group.<sup>29</sup>

Shull, Delbecq, and Cummings suggest dual functions for the leadership role: (1) task-instrumental, which includes "the attainment of resources, the

application of these resources to the task, and the processes which underlie both"; and (2) social-emotional, "which are concerned with maintaining the group and integrating group members into a satisfying social relationship."<sup>30</sup> Bither's findings that leaders tend to exceed other group members in the traits scores on dominance, exhibition, achievement ("task instrumental" properties), and social intelligence ("social-emotional") correspond to the dual function theory. Similarly, the leadership qualifications proposed by Elliott can also be classified by the dual function scheme. In addition, Shull suggests that these dual functions are not always served by the same person or persons. And neither function need be served by the designated leader as long as someone serves them.

If the task function can be separated from the social function as presumed by the dual function theory of leadership, people could be trained to assume either task-instrumental or social-emotional roles within the committee. Leadership teams would provide one pattern of group organization.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Participation by library staff can be

enhanced if alterations are made in the traditional library committee composition, functions, and performance. The composition of the committee should reflect heterogeneity in status and by department whenever possible. Committee size and individual personality traits are important considerations for effective decision making.

Traditional committee functions must be expanded to allow staff to participate in reaching decisions as a whole, as well as to conduct research in smaller groups. In addition, all staff should be included in personnel management decisions.

Performance within a committee can be more effective if the nominal process of decision making is balanced against the interacting process. Leadership qualities, both task-oriented and social-emotionally oriented, could be assumed by staff properly trained for these roles; in this way, the leadership base could be expanded.

Consideration and implementation of these suggested changes for the traditional committee should not only meet some of the current staff demands for greater participation in library management but should also improve the quality of those decisions made within the committee.

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