BUL 1039

Starting a Steering Committee:

A Change Agent's Guide to Success

Melissa Hamilton
Associate Extension Educator,
University of Idaho Extension,
Valley County

David Callister
Assistant Extension Educator,
University of Idaho Extension,
Butte County

Karie Boone
Applied Social Scientist,
Washington State University

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Introduction

THE FORMATION OF A STEERING COMMITTEE to accomplish a goal is a powerful community development tool. Leadership for these efforts can come from organizations, individuals, or a government agency. Steering committees act to garner support and buy-in from other organizations and community members. They identify gaps and barriers to overcome obstacles, identify milestones of success, and celebrate accomplishments along the way. This guide includes various related aspects central to effective committee building, plus a fictional case study that provides a success story of their application. In turn, the information should strengthen the ability of individuals and organizations to improve their community's development process and to brighten its future.

Community Committee Characteristics Framework

Steering committees are most appropriately used to develop a solution to an identified problem that needs a community's buy-in and multiple perspectives to successfully find a workable solution. Because their form and function can easily be conflated with other types of committee structures, we've included a committee characteristics framework (Table 1). The table highlights four types of committees that are effective at organizing people, as well as each type's membership structure, service role, foundational committee documents, and the commonly associated time frames involved with each committee.

Each type is distinct, but its application allows for flexibility. For example, a steering committee can encompass multiple types or evolve into coalitions

or board-of-director structures over time. Or if a community is grappling with several high-conflict issues, a coalition—with several working subcommittees moving multiple projects forward—might be the best approach. Whether settling on a combination or singular type, once you've established it, name the committee and define its structure. Also, note that some organizations group committees into one of two categories: ad hoc or standing. **Ad hocs** are temporary committees that have one purpose and disband after its realization. **Standing** committees also focus on a purpose; however, the group's membership may change over time. A standing committee remains in place over a longer time frame to accomplish or support a purpose. Thus, technically a steering committee is an ad hoc committee.

Committee Structures

Steering Committee

The establishment of a steering committee begins out of necessity and forms in response to community or organizational needs. Members are representatives from the community or organization who have the interest, knowledge, or resources to address the issue. A steering committee requires leadership, so participants need to set realistic expectations about their capacity as it forms. As a part of this phase, the committee identifies goals and objectives with action items to move the process forward. Steering committees help pave the way, create community connections, and facilitate the removal of unexpected roadblocks. A government agency, community volunteer, or other organization provides leadership. In the event of community resistance, a committee can help negotiate alternative solutions that better meet a community's needs. To do this all successfully, committees develop guiding foundational documents, including group guidelines, goals, objectives, and a scope of work.

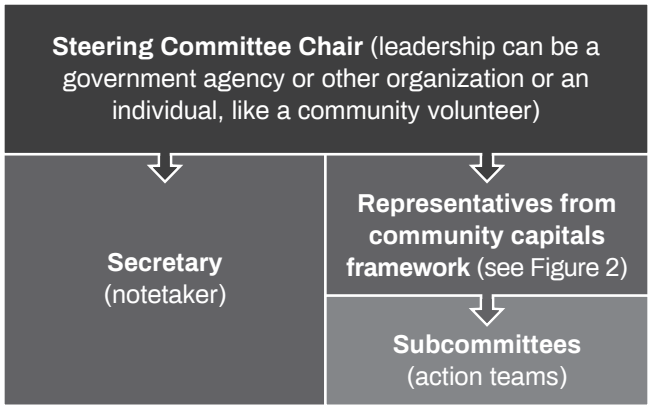

Figure 1. Organizational chart of steering committee leadership.

Table 1. Community committee characteristics framework.

Committee Type	Membership Type	Committee Role	Foundational Documents	Time Frame
Steering Committee	Targeted stakeholders relevant to the specific project focus	Develop project-based solution	Group guidelines, goals, objectives, and scope of work	Estimated time to complete project
Advisory Committee	Diverse representation (multiple perspectives)	To advise/ recommend	Meeting agenda to address specific discussion topics. If topics create conflict, group guidelines are recommended.	Estimated time frame of service. Example: 1–3 years of service and then renew, or refresh, committee participation.
Coalition/ Collaborative	Multiagencies, community members at-large	To address complicated community issues	Charter or Memorandum of Understanding, group guidelines, and agendas recommended	Estimated, to address complicated issue (ongoing or within a time frame)
Board of Directors	Targeted participation to represent the resources needed to support an organization (financial, political, nonprofit, etc.)	Provide "community capitals framework" support to the organization	Bylaws	Estimated time frame of service. Example: 1–3 years of service and then renew, or refresh, board participation.

Advisory Committee

An advisory committee is a diverse representation of members with a vested interest in your organization. It recommends actions, programs, and projects related to the current and future direction of an organization or community project. Members meet regularly in response to a meeting agenda presented by the leadership. To summarize, an advisory committee is an organizational support that promotes community programs and projects. It is a standing committee whose participants can renew or refresh their roles on a term basis.

Coalition/Collaborative

A coalition consists of multiagency representatives and community members who work together to address complicated issues. An example is a food coalition or forest collaborative.

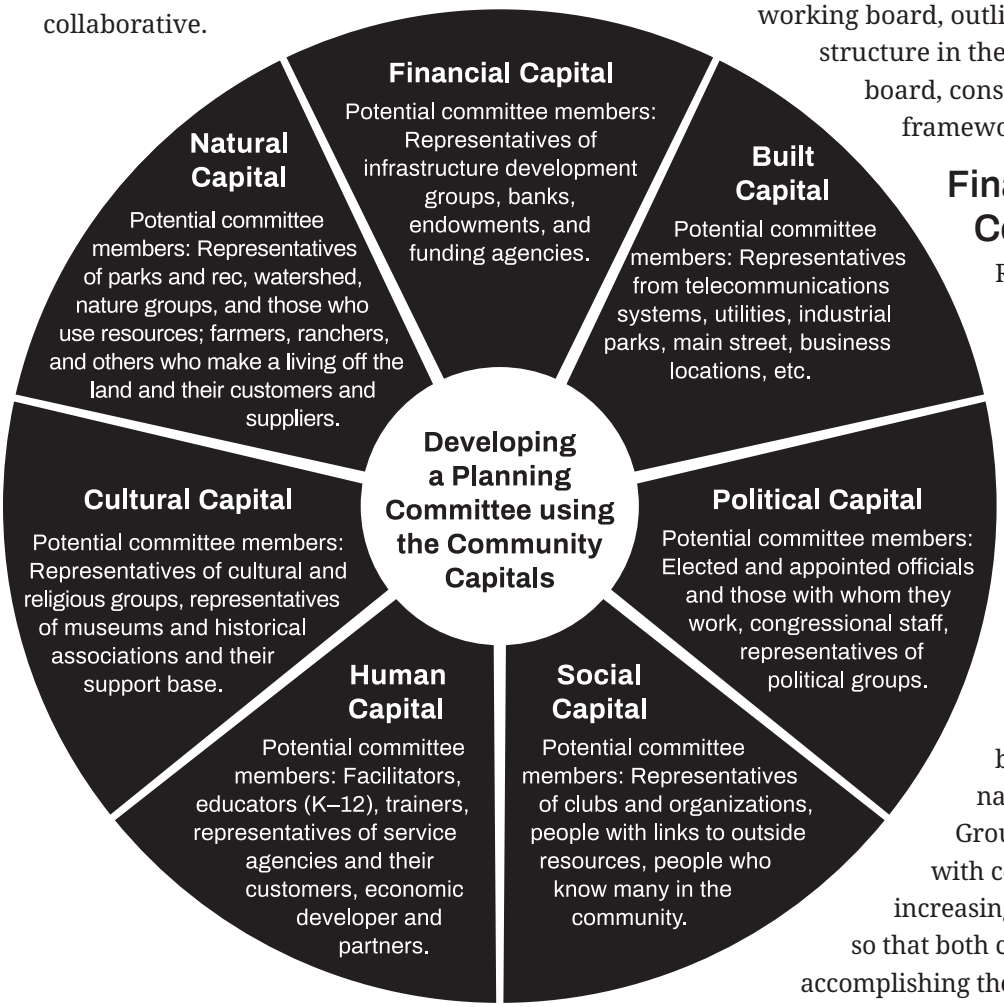

Figure 2. Stakeholder selection defined by the Community Capitals Framework.

Groups like this usually have a charter or a memorandum of understanding that documents the agency's goals and objectives and the role each agency or participant contributes. If the value of the coalition is demonstrated through multiagency and community member efforts working together, these groups can transition into a nonprofit by developing bylaws and appointing a board of directors. Coalition/collaborative members are often invited to serve on the newly formed nonprofit board of directors for a specific term because they have valuable perspective and expertise.

Board of Directors

This committee directly links to an organization's structure and plays a supportive role. For example, some organizations, like nonprofits, use paid staff or a group of unpaid volunteers to form a working board, outlining the group's goals and structure in the bylaws. When forming your board, consider the community capitals framework (Figure 2).

Final Thoughts on Committee Structures

Relationships set the foundation for all committees (steering, advisory, coalition, and board of directors). The chair or facilitator of the group process helps create high-functioning committees by providing group guidelines, goals, objectives, and meeting agendas for each committee type. Defining participant roles and the expectations of your steering committee at the beginning of the process helps to navigate potential future conflict. Groups that have a pathway to deal with conflict will be more resilient, increasing the committee's sustainability so that both continue moving toward accomplishing their purpose.

Case Study:

A rural school district experiences an influx of non-English speaking refugees. Students from the new families struggle in the school because of the language barrier and the challenge of learning a new culture. At a regular school board meeting, parents, teachers, and school administrators express concerns that the students are falling behind. The school board determines the need for the formation of a steering committee to find resources to address the issues facing the students. They name the steering committee Refugees Welcome (RW).

Selecting Committee Members

Stakeholder Identification Tools

Steering committees stacked with diverse member strengths can support expansive community buy-in, offer a larger skill set to move a project forward, and support the necessary networking to carry out a committee's charge. The collective contributions of a diverse committee build local capacity and ownership of the process and outcomes, an important aspect of sustainable development. While some short-term volunteer events strive for "many hands make light work" (Culp 2000), a steering committee works on substantive or complex community-based projects/issues that require more strategic steering-member selection.

Figures 2 and 3 provide two different visual tools to consider when selecting steering committee members. The community capitals outlined in Figure 2 identify valuable community connections (capital types) that different community members possess. Figure 3 focuses on some of the desirable attributes to look for when deciding on the best candidates from these pools. The combination of individual skill sets with diverse community capital representation offers an ideal model for membership that while not necessarily fully attainable is worth pursuing when recruiting participants.

As listed in Figure 3, the following briefly details individual member roles and their potential benefits:

Figure 3. Steering committee roles.

- **Connectors** link people and assets together in ways that add value.
- **Conveners** bring together true community representatives that stimulate community conversations and spark the co-creation process.
- **Social Entrepreneurs** see new opportunities and ways to capitalize on them.
- **Strategists** recognize patterns that may reveal innovative ways to move forward.
- **Social Networking Catalysts** continue relationship building between face-to-face meetings by using social networking online tools.
- **Guides** map complex processes so others can understand them.
- **Knowledge Keepers** are different than notetakers. They distill conversations and synthesize information into key points and patterns (Jakes and Miller n.d.).

Steering committee members may fit into one or more of the community capitals presented in Figure 2: financial, built, political, social, human, cultural, or natural. The capitals are categories that help identify individuals or groups in the community. Representation from each of the capitals provides knowledge and resources in crucial areas to a committee during the planning and execution stages of community projects. This tool also helps to build on existing community assets.

Case Study:

The school board initially selects RW steering committee members based on their ability to help the new refugee students succeed. In addition to inviting parents, teachers, and school administrators, board members reach out to area religious leaders and representatives of potential funding organizations.

When board members apply the community capitals tool, however, they identify even more promising candidates to contact: for financial capital, a funding organization or a government agency representative; for built capital, if needed, a representative of a local telecommunications company or local contractor; for political capital, a school board member, county commissioner, or state legislator; for social capital, refugee community members and community service organizations; for human capital, the interested general public within the community; for cultural capital, religious and cultural leaders from both refugee and nonrefugee populations; and for natural capital, employers of the students' parents, at whose farms and businesses the refugees are working.

Steadily, the board built up its committee membership. Two parents of the students joined the committee, along with two teachers, a school board member, the minister of the church where most of the refugees attend, and a state legislator who lives in the school district. With seven committee members in hand, the school board hopes to have brought together a group with enough diverse community roles and individual attributes to effectively address the refugee issue (see Figures 2 and 3).

Exploring Group Dynamics, Participant Roles, and the Maintenance Plan

Group Dynamics

Group dynamics strongly influence a steering committee's effectiveness, so it's important to understand their function and impact. A group experiences five stages when developing a committee: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning (Figure 4). Although all stages are important, a steering committee's ability to navigate conflict (storming stage) is critical to accomplishing its identified goal.

Participant Roles and Commitment Expectations

When onboarding volunteer steering committee members, provide a clear time frame for service (we suggest 2–3 years, depending on the complexity of the issue) to ensure a participant's ongoing dedication

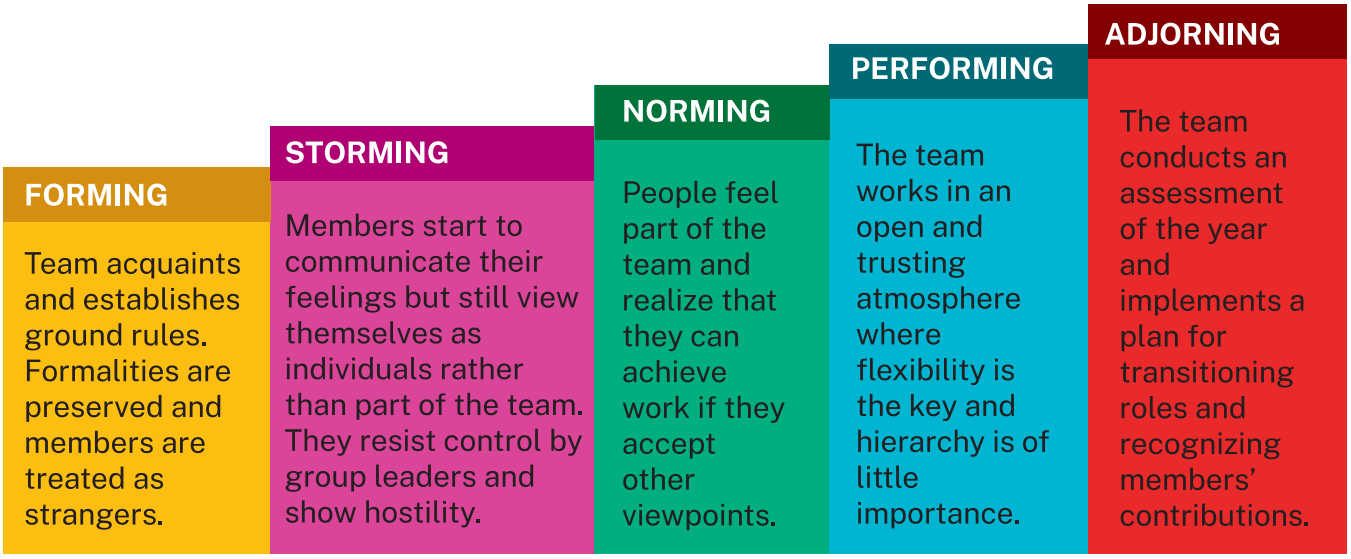

Figure 4. Tuckman's stages of group development.

and leadership. Change related to community development efforts takes patience and time. Indeed, committees that don't provide that kind of clarity often suffer stagnation, usually because members are burning out and/or have become apathetic from failed past efforts. Committees lacking action run the risk of turning into advisory boards that lack employees and/or initiative. If this occurs, identify paid organizational staff members to partner with volunteer steering committees to help provide leadership and repair and restore the group's momentum.

Case Study:

After recruiting RW committee members, organizers invite them to join the committee and give them a list of expectations. The list includes the number of meetings anticipated, their expected length, and who will likely lead the meetings. The RW committee meets biweekly, because of the urgency of the refugees' plight. Other committee members nominate the minister to lead the committee because they perceive him as fair and impartial. The onboarding includes a time frame of six months to find a solution.

Maintenance Plan

The maintenance plan for a steering committee identifies expectations for engagement, project milestones, conflict navigation, and a transition plan for steering committee project closure (University of Kansas n.d.):

Engagement

Committee members are more likely to be and remain engaged when they feel that others take their interests, needs, and ideas seriously and value them. A committee's fairness, openness, and honesty also strengthen a member's willingness to buy in to the project's value. Celebrating **milestones** is another way to help individuals feel appreciated and adds energy to the group's process.

Milestones

Milestones are check-in points that prompt reflection on the progress of a steering committee's efforts. When developing a committee's action plan, identify the potential milestones. Action plans often include "low-hanging fruit," items that can be accomplished within a short timeline and with little resources. Stopping to celebrate these achievements should motivate members to keep moving forward and to meet other, loftier goals set by the committee. Hold a celebratory dinner and/or recognize the individual contributions of team members through awards or praise to buoy the spirits of volunteer contributors. Public events or outlets of appreciation are also effective to celebrate and highlight milestones. Develop a press release for the local paper, promote your success via social media, thank partnering organizations, and hold an in-person potluck or dinner to recognize milestones and the contributions of members who helped a group meet its goals.

Navigating Conflict and Project Closure

Conflict throughout the steering committee process comes with the territory—it is part of working with a team and navigating community change. Thus, it is important for a committee to address and identify the root of any dysfunction to reach its performing stage (Figure 4). Usually, poor communication, lack of leadership, or unresolved individual or community issues is the culprit or at least one of them.

If a steering committee does not learn to navigate the storming process, it likely will stay stuck in that stage. To refocus, a group might review its foundational documents, including group agreements, goals, and objectives. Or perhaps a more direct approach is needed, like discussing if emergent issues outside of the committee's purview are to blame or need to be tabled. Indeed, care must be taken so that the group can stay focused on the assignments and goals established during the group's formation. If the task shifts, acknowledge that and give closure to the original effort by disbanding and forming a new steering committee to take on the new direction. If forming a new one, review Figures 1 and 2 to make sure you have the right players at the table to reach success.

Conclusion

Forming and maintaining a steering committee is not for the faint of heart. For the best result, identify what type of committees will serve your cause best; understand the committee member selection process and group behavioral dynamics; develop a maintenance plan; discover opportunities for

Case Study:

RW committee leadership facilitates discussion of some of the problems confronting the refugee students. Possible challenges include language and cultural barriers during meetings. Early in the meeting process, the RW committee determines that the biggest obstacle to student education is poor communication due to language barriers. It resolves that carefully listening and documenting the concerns of students, parents, and teachers is fundamental to solve the problem and to fund any job positions, equipment, or technology that might help the new students succeed.

During one committee meeting, members note that only two of the refugees have good English skills. Plans are made to have the two serve as English tutors for the others. The teachers identify a grant to pay for the weekly tutoring. The tutors work weekly with parents and students to improve the refugees' English skills. The teachers identify a grant that will cover the fees for translators to work weekly with parents and students to improve the refugees' English skills. The minister works with his church to provide a safe location for the night classes. The classes begin four months into the process. Initially, a few of the families hesitate to attend the night school, but the minister and parents serving on the RW committee redress their concerns: The school board member and state legislator work to develop long-term funding for an additional English as a Second Language (ESL) instructor in the school system during the next state legislative session. Soon all eligible students benefit from the extra help provided.

The school board member serving on the RW committee keeps other members informed of RW committee progress at regular meetings. At the end of the six-month period, the school board recognizes the efforts of the RW committee at their regular meeting and in the local paper. Having met their goals, the RW committee disbands.

committee transitions; and learn when and how to close committee projects. Use the case-study scenario as a source of concrete examples to help you see how these concepts might play out when a committee addresses a community issue.

Committees are dynamic and consist of individuals who have different ideas for how they would like to contribute, expectations of who and how to best move them forward, and varying expectations about time lines. Community committees have varying levels of resources to move a committee toward accomplishing its purpose. Because of the complexity of group dynamics and social change, following this publication's advice should help you to steer your steering committee's survival.

Thank you, community leaders, change makers, organizations, and government leadership for your volunteerism, leadership, and civic engagement. Your local perspectives are extremely valuable to finding solutions to community challenges. The first step to address these challenges: form solution-focused steering committees.

"A small group of thoughtful people could change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

—Margaret Mead

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Photo credits

Figure 2 adapted from Bargainer et al. 2018, which is based on Figure 1 in Emery and Flora 2006 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254909093_Spiraling-Up_Mapping_Community_Transformation_with_Community_Capitals_Framework.

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