

It's a New Year—Do You Know Where Your Committees Are?

"I don't remember what committee I'm on." "Our chair hasn't called a meeting yet." "I don't think we're responsible for that." If you've heard any of these comments from your members, it may mean that it is time to take stock of your committees. Many associations make committee assignments once a year, typically at the time a new president takes office. What happens after that varies from group to group. Many take a "sink or swim" attitude. If the committee isn't functioning smoothly, it's easy to blame the chair and hope for a better result the following year.

A more productive approach is to review committees at least once each year as to their structure, function and performance. The committee charge should be examined and refined. Each year the committee's continuing existence should be questioned. Should this committee's tasks be subsumed by another? Has the larger organization's mission or energies shifted sufficiently that this committee's work is no longer on target? Could the committee function more effectively with a different number of members? Do committee members feel as if their time has been well spent? If the review is done annually, this need not be an onerous task. It does need to be done diplomatically. All too often, if committee structural and performance reviews are done at all, they are done at the board level without sufficient input from the committee members who are in the trenches and whose insights are needed for effective improvements to be made. The review should be conducted in a collegial manner, in a way which respects the volunteers' energies and talents.

Once you've ascertained that the committees' structures and functions are appropriate, determine a regular, informal system of checking in with the chairs as to how things are going. This is probably best done by an association's president or president-elect. This shouldn't be a matter of

nagging, babysitting, or simply announcing deadlines for reports. It should be a genuine inquiry into how things are going, and determining whether more help is needed. There are few things more demoralizing than being the chair of a committee where just one or two people are doing all of the work, and the only input from officers or the board is negative.

One of the major characteristics of effective committees and strong associations is a large pool of volunteers. Take an annual look at how you recruit new committee members. It's not enough to make an announcement at a luncheon gathering or to ask for volunteers at a board meeting. Here are some other suggestions:

- List committees on your membership form, and ask members to indicate their interest. If you do this, make sure you have an effective means to follow up. Members will be annoyed if they indicate their interest and then aren't contacted for months. If the committee meets only a few times a year, make an initial contact and explain this.
- List committees, their charges and their chair's contact information in a place that is easily accessible by your members. This may mean your website, a membership directory or your newsletter. This serves a dual function of committee member recruitment and of publicity for all of the types of work your organization does.
- Consider spotlighting a committee as a regular feature of your newsletter. This type of article should not be a dry recitation of the members and committee charge. Emphasize the personality of the members, the collegial atmosphere and the great pizza that is a regular feature of the meetings. Allow the reader to gain an appreciation for how the work is being done and to allow her to imagine herself as a committee member.

None of the above suggestions is sufficient in itself, because each is a general appeal. Such appeals are crucial, so that every member knows of the work of the association and committee opportunities. But the most effective way to recruit committee members is by personal invitation. Board and committee members must constantly be alert for new talent. It may be hard to remember a time when you weren't besieged with requests to serve on boards and committees, but keep in mind that many members who are new to the profession will be flattered by your interest in their abilities and will be very willing to do committee work. Many savvy new attorneys understand that such work helps to build resumes and leadership skills. Don't overlook experienced practitioners, either. Is there a senior attorney who hasn't served on your women's bar's committees or board for a number of years? Perhaps she just needs an invitation, an affirmation that her skills and experience are still valued. Enlist your colleagues in an effort to find new committee members. Tell a friend that you'd love to have representation from her firm on your committee. Ask her to identify someone whom she'd recommend and ask her to explain to that individual the value of involvement.

Vital, well-run committees are the lifeblood of every women's bar association. Their smooth functioning must not be left to chance. Make a new year's resolution to focus the attention on them that they deserve.

March— Women's History Month

How will your group celebrate Women's History Month? Kudos go to the **New Mexico Women's Bar Association** for its web page sharing information on New Mexico's "First 100 Women Lawyers." See member links at our website, www.ncwba.org.