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## Working with advisory committees

Phyllis Worden<sup>1</sup>

### Quick Facts

Advisory committees can help evaluate and plan county Cooperative Extension programs and provide support for on-going Extension programs.

People selected for advisory committees should be concerned about the activities and problems of the committee, represent a variety of ideas and have enough time to devote to the committee.

Leadership is one of the most important aspects of any advisory group.

The size of an advisory group will depend on the purpose of the committee; the best size for an effective group discussion is from five to nine people.

In groups, be aware that up to 80 percent of each message is communicated non-verbally.

Physical environment can affect the function of committees, so suitable surroundings should be provided.



### Selecting an Advisory Committee

Select people who are concerned about the activities, problems and concerns of the committee. Select those who represent a variety of ideas or different groups of people in the county or community. Select those who have enough personal time and energy to participate. A revolving committee with one-third of the members replaced every year works best. Simple "job descriptions" for committee members are helpful. These might include:

- a statement that describes the purpose and composition of the committee,
- how and when the committee is appointed, and
- responsibilities or descriptions of the activities requested of the committee members.

### Characteristics of Small Groups

A leader's attitude often is more important than leadership style. Leader's or chairperson's duties might include:

- Set meeting date and mail out agenda.
- State specific objectives for the meeting and keep discussions on track.

A Cooperative Extension agent might ask, "Why form a local advisory committee?" Here are a few reasons. Perhaps you can add others.

- To help evaluate and plan county Cooperative Extension programs.
- To provide support for on-going Cooperative Extension programs.
- To provide a local communications link to assess local needs and determine program assistance through Colorado State University.
- To assist local Cooperative Extension agents and specialists with program priorities.

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- Introduce committee members; encourage the use of first names.
- Set time limits for discussions.
- Set the "tone" for the meetings; discourage monopoly of discussions by a few.
- Make committee assignments and request a committee report by a certain date.
- Attempt to remain neutral; vote only in case of a tie.
- Encourage participation and interaction of committee members; seating arrangements do affect interaction by committee members.
- Suggest alternative solutions to be considered.
- Invite resource people to share ideas.
- Make sure committee members know each other, especially when a new committee is formed or when new members join the group.
- Set up guidelines to evaluate decisions made by the group.

The best size for an effective group discussion is from five to nine people. The maximum number should be 12 to 15 people. The success of a discussion in a large group can be attributed to a confident leader.

In an analysis of Cooperative Extension committees by Larry Dunn, Ph.D., leadership program specialist and Marcia Kenyon, volunteer trainer, it was found that effective Cooperative Extension advisory committees had the following in common.

- They had between six to 10 members, including the county Cooperative Extension director.
- The committee met a minimum of once a month.
- They always had a written agenda.
- Members exhibited a solid commitment to attend all meetings.
- A majority had a two- or three-year term of service.
- Committee members were chosen to represent a variety of interests and needs of the communities involved in their respective geographic locations.
- New committee members received an orientation to the advisory committee member's job and the Cooperative Extension system.
- Many of the effective committees invited legislators and local county and state government officials to meet with them on occasion.

### Factors That May Affect Group Behavior

- Each group member is an individual and often will behave as such.
- Some members may feel other group members are a threat to their egos.
- Groups tend to develop structure whether there are formally organized officers or not.

- Groups like to set goals and attempt to reach them as efficiently as possible.
- Advisory groups often develop plans to the "demanding" stage and get upset if their ideas are not immediately implemented.
- Power plays may be involved; some come from an outside position of importance or wealth, but often may arise from the behavior in a group.

Table 1 lists some behavior characteristics present in groups. A group will function better if the supportive behavior characteristics are stronger.

**Table 1: Group behavior characteristics.**

Supportive Climates	Defensive Climates
<b>Description</b> —non-judgmental questions or statements.	<b>Evaluation</b> —to pass judgment or to blame; causes one to be "on guard."
<b>Problem orientation</b> —communicate a desire to define and solve problems.	<b>Control</b> —attempts to change attitudes or behaviors of others in group; creates defensiveness.
<b>Spontaneity</b> —honesty and straight-forwardness.	<b>Strategy</b> —to "manipulate" others; control of group.
<b>Empathy</b> —expressions of respect for other group.	<b>Neutrality</b> —expresses lack of concern for others.
<b>Equality</b> —to enter discussions and plan with mutual respect.	<b>Superiority</b> —superior air to others in the group.
<b>Provisionalism</b> —to investigate issues and not take sides; open to other points of view.	<b>Certainty</b> —dogmatic; to know all the answers; doesn't care to listen to what others say.

Research from Gibb 1961.

### Resources

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