

Taking a Wrong Turn with a Steering Committee

Question:

I had a meeting with a Steering Committee today. They were telling me what to do and how to do it. The problem was that everything was different than when this same group met last month. It is confusing. How can I better manage the work of the Steering Committee?

Paul

Answer:

Paul,

You know why these groups are called Steering Committees? It is because they will steer you off the road if you are not careful. They remind me of the people that sit in the backset of a car and tell you how to drive. I think the Americans call them “backside drivers”. Mrs. Lahcom is a good example of the backside drivers. She is telling me to go right and then go left and then go straight and before you know it we are driving off the road.

In your work environment, Steering Committees are generally formed when the project sponsor does not have the guts to make the tough project decisions himself. He feels like he needs some help and so he invites some of his peers to assist in the decision making. A good sponsor will tell the rest of the Steering Committee that they should provide input to him and he will make the final decision. If they don’t like it, they can steer themselves somewhere else.

Some project sponsors try to be popular and tell the Steering Committee that all of them have a voice in making final decisions. This usually results in chaos, but I have read in a book somewhere that this crazy technique can work at times.

Project Manager and Steering Committee

The project manager does not set up the Steering Committee, so you are unfortunately not able to cancel it either. If your sponsor sets one up you are forced to live with it. This does not mean you have to like it, but just live with it. I have a couple Steering Committee strategies that will help.

- **Pretend they don’t exist.** Many Steering Committees meet and never agree on anything. In this case you can just ignore them since they will never agree on anything of interest to you. You can go on your merry way and do whatever you want.
- **Acknowledge but ignore.** Many Steering Committees make decisions but very few of them ever follow-up to see the results. In this case, you can take their input, nod your head and say “yes, yes, yes” and then ignore the decision and continue to do

what you want. It is likely that no one will ever follow-up anyway and so really who cares!

- **Pay lip service but ignore.** If your Steering Committee wants to follow-up on their decisions, you can pretend that you are following through. This includes mentioning the decision in a status report. But in terms of your actual project ... you guessed it, ignore their decisions.

When the Steering Committee is Useful

I don't want to leave you with the impression that Steering Committees do not have any use. There is one area where they can really help – placing the blame if there are problems. If you find that in spite of ignoring the Steering Committee your project somehow steers off track by itself, then the Steering Committee is a good place to blame. In this case, your strategy changes from ignore to blame. Now you will do everything that the Steering Committee says, and then state that the decisions of the Steering Committee have lead to the problems.

A twist on this logic is to ask them for direction, implement their suggestion slightly differently and blame the whole thing on a “misunderstanding”. You can use this technique to bury a lot of project management sins so that you can get a better start.

Summary

The term “steering” committee comes from their tendency to want to steer a car without being able to see the road. Think of blindfolded people in your back seat telling you how to drive. The job of a Steering Committee is to provide confusion in the overall direction of projects and to second guess the professional project manager. If you have confidence in your own ability, the first strategy to deal with the Committee is to figure out creative ways to ignore them. However, if your project is in trouble, quickly embrace them instead and use them as the reason for all that is ill on the project.

In my native country we have a saying – “Steering Committees – can't live with them, and can't live with them”.