



Steering Committee Basics, Composition & Management

For Sponsors and Project Managers

Steering Committee Basics

What is a Steering Committee?

A project Steering Committee is responsible for the business issues associated with a project that are essential to the ensuring the delivery of the project outputs and the attainment of project outcomes.

When is a Steering Committee Selected?

A Steering Committee should be selected at the beginning of a project, usually in the Pre-Initiation Stage. In general, the Steering Committee is a senior management team that guides and is accountable for the project and gains management commitment.

How do I Determine if a Steering Committee Is Needed?

Not all projects require a Steering Committee. A Steering Committee is highly recommended for projects that have the following attributes:

- A high dollar amount cost (\$1 million or more)
- A long duration (more than six months)
- A high complex and/or multiple organizational unit participants (goes across multiple departments or business units)
- It changes in business practices or business processes
- It encompasses sensitive areas that necessitate communication at the senior management level
- It involves third party software
- It uses outside consultants in a project management role.

A Steering Committee is required on any project designed as a Major Project.



Steering Committee Member Selection and Guidance on Committee Size

Who should serve on the Steering Committee?

The **membership** is determined by the Project Sponsor and may consist of:

- Project Sponsor, who should always be a member and may chair the meeting.
- Business Process Owners
- Representatives with project management governance expertise
- Representatives from selected key stakeholders
- Experts from within the agency
- External, independent representatives, such as specialist consultants or representatives from other agencies

Steering committees benefit from a mix of executive leadership and practitioners or industry/discipline leaders. A balance of hands -on experience and change agents (those who are in a position to bring about institutional change) is also indicative of a strong steering committee.

What is the Project Manager's Role in Relation to the Steering Committee?

The project manager is not a member of the Steering Committee but is essentially “contracted” by the Steering Committee to ensure the work of the project is undertaken as agreed. In contrast, the Steering Committee provides support, guidance and executive oversighting of progress. The Project Manager normally attends meetings of the Steering Committee to report on project progress and answer any questions raised by members. An additional resource (such as a project team member or administrative staff) may assist the Steering Committee by recording the decisions of the meeting.

“Must Haves” Attributes for Potential Steering Committee Members

Ensuring that the right disposition of steering committee members is selected is critical to project success. Potential members must:

- Have a known vested interest in making the project and the committee a success.
- Be motivated for the project to succeed.
- Be willing to participate as a committee member and agree to the committee's goals and expectations.
- Have the authority to make decisions on behalf of their constituents and authority over the project team itself.
- Be willing and able to work with other committee members.
- Be able to perform the roles and fulfill the responsibilities of the committee.



- Represent project constituents.
- Have a clear line of authority over the project team.

Additionally, individual Steering Committee members provide support and guidance for those who directly manage the project and, therefore, should:

- Understand the strategic implications and outcomes of initiatives being pursued.
- Appreciate the significance of the project to stakeholders and represent their interests.
- Be genuinely interested in the initiative and the outcomes being pursued.
- Be an advocate for the project's outcomes.
- Have a broad understanding of project management issues and the approach being used.

In practice, this means they do the following:

- Ensure the project's outputs meet the requirements of process owners and stakeholders.
- Help balance conflicting priorities and resources.
- Provide guidance to the project team and users of the project's outputs.
- Consider ideas and issues raised.
- Foster positive communication regarding the project's progress and outcomes.
- Review the progress of the project.
- Check adherence of project activities to standards of practice.
- Be interested in the project and champion its cause.

How Big should the Committee Be?

Ideally a Steering Committee is made up of three to six people, but may be larger in order to obtain buy-in or have the appropriate coalition of sponsors.

A small group (say up to five), comprised of relatively senior people, can make strategic decisions, give strategic advice, and also give the project influence among the intended users. However, the small membership may not give the steering group breadth of experiences and perspectives and busy senior staff may not be able to give enough time.

A larger group, (say up to ten), is manageable when the meetings are very organized and structured. A large group can obviously include a greater range of members, thus tapping in to a wider range of experience. However, a larger group can sometimes lose its effectiveness because of size and meetings are more difficult to arrange and conduct.



How can the PM Help Steering Committee Members Fulfill their Roles?

- Make clear to members what their likely responsibilities and time commitments will be.
- Include external representatives to allow different perspectives
- Set performance indicators for the group as well as the project
- Ensure clarity of both individual and group roles
- Produce minutes that include clear action lists showing who will take each action
- Create time for debate of the issues in the meeting
- Issue the agenda at least a week before meetings to allow the members sufficient preparation time
- Meet as regularly as is necessary to keep abreast of the progress of the project

Establishing Steering Committee Meetings

What should the PM and Sponsor Consider when Planning Steering Committee Meetings?

Steering Committee meetings should be well organized and should have a clear outcome established prior to the meeting. The following steps should be followed when establishing the Steering Committee meetings:

1. **Determine who is running the meetings.** This can be one of the most important decisions when establishing the Steering Committee meetings and should be considered carefully. The Sponsor and the Project Manager should determine this at the beginning of the project. When selecting who will be running the meetings, use common sense:
 - a. The level in the organization of the person running the meetings should match appropriately to the Steering Committee members. There is not a concrete rule for determining the level of the person running the meeting. In some cases, a manager or director may be most appropriate to run these meetings.
 - b. The person running the meeting should be capable of running a well-organized and effective meeting and should be able to handle difficult questions posed during meetings.
 - c. If the Steering Committee is composed mostly of business personnel, the person with whom they are most used to interacting with (e.g. the Sponsor) should run the meeting.
2. **Establish an Initial Kick-off Meeting.** An initial kick-off meeting should be held to give an overview of the project to date and to explain expectations and purpose of the committee. This meeting should be well organized and should have a clear objective.



Depending on the point in the project in which this kick-off meeting is being conducted, some of the information normally shared may be premature --use common sense.

3. **Establish regular meetings.** For long-running projects (six months or more) every two weeks or once per month is generally a good frequency. Project, organizational or logistical factors may dictate a more or less frequent occurrence. These meetings should be scheduled as far ahead as possible and should be kept at a fairly regular frequency. Seek concurrence from the committee membership on frequency and standing meeting dates and times.
4. **Provide materials on a timely basis.** This step is imperative to allow the committee members an opportunity to prepare for the meeting so that their time is best used. The Agenda should be sent to the steering committee members several days prior to the meeting taking place to allow them to prepare for the meeting, request changes or add any new agenda items. *The information contained in the agenda should be brief and succinct. Committee members should be able to determine from the agenda the level of analysis required of any attached documentation.* This helps committee members know what materials to review and at what level, understand the issues to be discussed and make informed decisions.
5. **Follow up Promptly.** Within a week of the meeting, a copy of the minutes of the meeting should be circulated to all members. This is far more effective in ensuring that the minutes accurately reflect the decisions and discussions of the meeting. Members are more readily able to recall what was discussed at the time and ensure that any important issues or comments raised during the meeting have not been inadvertently overlooked.

The Project Sponsor may meet with the Project Manager on a more frequent basis. The Steering Committee can expect the Project Manager to objectively report to them on the status of the project, including any problems or issues that require their direction.

How can the PM and Sponsor Ensure the Meetings are Well-run and Effective?

The following pointers should be considered when preparing for a Steering Committee meeting:

Scheduling Considerations

- Find the best way to schedule meetings with the invitees.
- Ensure that the key members of the committee can make the meetings before setting them up.



- Set up the meetings for the remainder of the project at the beginning in order to get on people's schedule as far in advance as possible. Use the Outlook calendar tools so that meetings can be changed and invitees will be notified of the change.
- Attempt to keep the meetings on their original date and time. Unforeseen events may require a change, but this should be the exception.
- Have the Sponsor send out an e-mail or other communication expressing the importance of attending this meeting.

Meeting Structure

- Start and end the meetings on time.
- Have an agenda for every meeting and a well-thought out objective for the meeting. Start the meeting by stating the key points you to be accomplished with the Steering Committee meeting. Check those objectives at the end of the meeting to ensure they were accomplished.
- Allow adequate time in the meeting agenda to cover all topics and allow for questions and discussion.

Meeting Preparation

- Create a formal presentation that is concise, well organized and polished.
- Arrive in the meeting room ahead of time ensure all materials and equipment are present and in working order.
- Make necessary copies well in advance of the meeting. Don't assume members will bring copies or want to take notes electronically.
- Conduct a pre-meeting with the Project Manager and Sponsor to ensure the project leadership is in agreement on the purpose and contents of the presentation.
- If more than one person is presenting, practice ahead of time.
- Prepare the Sponsor and other appropriate Steering Committee members ahead of time if there are critical project issues.
 - **Don't use the Steering Committee meeting to announce to the Sponsor that a project will be late or over budget or otherwise compromised.**

Presenting Issues or Risks

- When presenting issues for which you want resolutions or suggestions from the Steering Committee, do as much pre-work as possible and walk the group through the issue clearly and concisely. Have a very clear process for leading the group to an answer if you want to resolve the issue in the meeting.



- Think through possible suggestions or resolutions to an issue before presenting it to a Steering Committee.
- Clearly explain the impact that the issue or risk has on the project until it is resolved.
- If the issue cannot be resolved within the Steering Committee meeting itself, explain the date in the project schedule at which the issue must be resolved in order for the project to stay on track.
- Only raise issues in a Steering Committee that the Steering Committee would care about. If there are internal project issues that don't affect the overall outcome of the project, don't burden the Steering Committee with that information.
- If you have a controversial or complicated issue to discuss, do some pre-meeting discussion of the issue with key members of the Steering Committee before the meeting. This will enable you to get through the issue much easier.

Meeting Follow-ups

- Use a white board or flip chart to note 'Parking Lot' items.
- Document follow-up items throughout the meeting and allow time at the end to assign and owner and due date to all follow-up items.
- Send out follow-up notes on the meeting to the Steering Committee members, highlighting key follow-up action items. These should be clear and concise. Generally, a quick e-mail is the best way to ensure that these notes are read.

Should We Appoint a Committee Facilitator ?

A facilitator is there to make it easier for the whole group to reach its goals; not to direct what those goals should be, and can do a lot to help a meeting run smoothly. A facilitator may be a member of the project team or support personnel for the Sponsor's business unit. Duties of a facilitator may include the following:

Housekeeping:

- Making sure everyone knows the time and place of the meeting.
- Sending out the agenda, minutes of the last meeting and any reports in plenty of time for everyone to have read them.
- Checking the meeting place is warm, quiet and comfortable, with enough seats for everyone.
- Seeing that drinks or other refreshments are available.
- Thinking about the agenda, and trying to be aware what issues there might be disagreement over so as to prepare to help the Chair guide the discussion smoothly.



Facilitating the Meeting:

- Welcoming new members or visitors, asking people to introduce themselves.
- Making sure that everyone has agendas and minutes of the last meeting.
- If not the responsibility of the Chair, explaining the agenda, saying which items are for discussion, which for decision.
- Asking if there are any other items which need to be discussed.

Other points to consider:

- The chair and facilitator's authority should come from the fact that the agenda is the 'contract' which exists between all members - this is what they have agreed to discuss at that meeting.
- Allowing people to defer or add items during the meeting (to an excess) prevents the meeting from getting through what has been agreed.

Ideas on How to Engage Your Steering Committee

Many projects find it difficult to involve members of the Steering Committee between meetings, as often the types of people who are members have very busy schedules and have little time to commit to the project itself apart from attending the actual meeting. Some examples of how to keep your Steering Committee members actively involved in the project are as follows:

- Think about including the Steering Committee members at the RFP writing stage. Engage their help in writing the RFP so that they have ownership of the ideas.
- Make Steering Committee members feel valued - it is a privilege to be on the steering group and their contributions will be invaluable; remind them that they are at the cutting edge of project developments.
- Ask Steering Committee members to read important articles and provide the project team with feedback.
- If you are producing deliverables such as a publication, ask Steering Committee members to view a draft copy and provide feedback.
- Ensure that Steering Committee members take an active role at any events that you run in order that they identify with the project and keep up-to-date with new developments.