

# Committees, a Perspective

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When I was asked to write an editorial on "individual versus committee leadership," I changed the title. In my view, this is not an adversary relationship. Committees cannot lead. They *can* advise.

The performance of committees has been lampooned from various directions. "A camel is a horse designed by a committee." A. Whitney Griswold, late president of Yale, said, "The Mona Lisa was not painted by a committee." Henry Kissinger was equally pessimistic. Committees, said he, "are

sometimes sterilizers of ideas, rarely creators of them." I have a colored cartoon of three hippopotami with their enormous mouths wide open. The label says, "After all is said and done, there's a lot more said than done."

However lampooned committees may be, they have become a way of doing business in universities. They have become the life-style in most departments. It is my impression, however, that committees are not the life-style of industrial laboratories. Therefore, there must be strong reasons for their differential existence in universities.

The domination of departments by committees is a fairly recent phenomenon. I suspect that L. R. Jones, in advancing the Department of Plant Pathology at the University of Wisconsin, was neither hindered nor helped by committees in placing his department high in the scientific pecking order.

It is probable that two factors have aided the gravitation toward the committee system. First, a perceived feeling slowly developed that department heads were becoming managers rather than leaders. This, in turn, was probably a response to management pressures from the overorganized bureaucracy above them. The individuals were being reduced to ciphers in the president's computer. My old chief, W. L. Slate, used to say, "Overorganization breeds mediocrity and mediocrity breeds overorganization."

In any event, no amount of management will produce a brilliant idea for research, but it will produce dissatisfaction with the manager. I seriously doubt that L. R. Jones was the manager type.

Scientists must be nonconformists at heart, because research is to look for what is different in the world. In my view, they must be left alone to think. If they are pushed too much, they encourage the formation of committees to diminish the authority of the manager. This is a sweet sensation to a nonconformist, and the first thing you know the department is full of committees.

The probable second reason for the rise of committees is that administrative leaders are scarce in the scientific population. This rarity is accounted for by the screening process. Those who are destined to be leaders of people are extroverts at heart. They are "sympatico." The extroverts tend to go into business where they fit well. The introverts are attracted to universities. They hurry through the front door of the "Hall of Ivy" to escape the harsh realities of the real world. They do not understand people

very well. They are not "imprinted" to be department heads.

Nevertheless, department heads have the responsibility of building and maintaining a distinguished department. They can't really delegate that to committees. President Truman, pointing to his desk, said, "The buck stops here," and Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that "an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man." I smile when I hear that the power of leadership ought to be transferred to committees, and then hear that the success of committees depends on a strong chairman. If the latter is so, then the success of a department also depends on a strong chairman.

If the department head can think creatively, he has acquired a reputation in science and thus can lead his young staff members to go and do likewise. Lacking that innovative ability, he tries to manage his people, and this leads to failure and to the rise of committees.

Industry runs training conferences for its leaders. If such exist in universities, I am not aware of them.

It has been astonishing to watch as the authority of the department head has leaked away into the hands of committees. The post has shriveled so much that few people will put up with it for long. The turnover is high. When turnover is high, one suspects a fault in the system. It is surely overorganization to expect a department chairman to lead his department to greater achievement and simultaneously reduce his ability to lead by channeling decisions through committees.

What are the costs and benefits? First, what are the costs? Even the most avid supporters of committees generally agree that committees are slow, ponderous, and expensive. One chief said that 10-15% of the time of his staff is devoted to committees. Let us say he has a department of 10 professionals. Without committees he would have enough money to hire the equivalent of one more professional. I heard of a committee that had 50 meetings in one year, some lasting a day or two. Let us repeat, "After all is said and done, there's a lot more said than done."

In contrast with industry, universities don't seem to have a "bottom line," no profits to worry about. Sometimes, I catch myself wondering if universities can survive the high costs of committees in times of tight money and falling enrollments. If parents paying higher and higher tuition knew the costs, what would they say?

We turn now to benefits. Many have said that committees are good for morale. Bill Merrill in his speech before the Kansas City meeting said "Every flea wants his own dog." Others have said that to be on a committee flatters the ego, and in these days of overorganization, this is a powerful point.

Some have said that a committee can spread the blame when an unpleasant decision has to be made. President Truman covered this point, too: "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen." One plant pathologist told me that a single leader is a dictator and he believes in a democracy despite all its ponderous machinery. I doubt if L. R. Jones was a dictator. Some have said that committees facilitate communication with the faculty. I always thought that was the role of faculty meetings. I have heard it argued that committees relieve the department chairman of administrative details. I always thought that was the function of the head office.

And finally, no chief can generate all the bright ideas needed to form and keep running a distinguished department. He welcomes suggestions from anyone. When a tricky problem arrives, he calls together an ad hoc synergistic advisory group to help generate such ideas. I suspect that L. R. Jones did just that.