

## Leadership

Unfortunately, the political and membership processes we've dealt with in the previous two chapters still require you to find outstanding people to lead your committees and working groups, and particularly your parish committee.

Notice that as we go along, we seem to be using the word "leader" interchangeably with "chairperson." That's intentional. We think your chairpeople should do just that, lead — that means being constantly active in motivating (and even occasionally manipulating) your members, and in shaping the outcome and direction of your committee's work.

This may violate your own mental picture of what a committee chairperson should be. Perhaps you've been influenced by parliamentary procedure, where a chairperson has a clearly defined role; in that context, chairing meetings often seems limited to recognizing the next speaker, or knowing what the rulebook says is supposed to happen next. Or, perhaps your role model for a good chairperson is someone who's a good note-taker, or a meeting convener, or a Great Compromiser.

In the setting of a liturgy committee, these models just aren't going to be good enough. As you've probably noticed already, discussing liturgy is a touchy business; without pushing, serious discussion just won't happen. The recurring problems of liturgy committees — constant conflict and unendurable focus on trivia — exist because *the group is not being managed well*.

It's tough enough to get people to work together in a business setting. In liturgy, where people on the one hand react powerfully to change and on the other are reticent about discussing and participating, you've got even more work cut out for you. A passive, yea-or-nay meeting format will only serve to keep emotional conflicts simmering below the surface while people focus on the votable. Weak, timid leadership means that the group wanders aimlessly through discussions that

somehow never have a single visible effect on a parish's liturgies. We hope to make it clear in this chapter that leadership of a liturgy group is not a passive role — setting the time for the next meeting, taking minutes, buying the Maxwell House.

Go back to the beginning of Chapter 1 and take a look at the terrible meeting situations we described. Every one of them could have been avoided or nipped in the bud with a quick directive from the chair: That's not our business. Let's defer this. We need to go on to other things. We resolved this last week. Let's leave it alone for a while. Let's save this for our annual review.

Sound a little overbearing? It can be — but from the right person, it won't be.

The danger isn't too much leadership but too much useless muscle flexing. Consider the case of the chairperson who decides that a parish job is the ideal setting for doing what real-life big shots do: making decisions, choosing among options presented by various subordinates, criticizing. In this scenario, parishioners who have been real-life middle managers a bit too long get to work out their daytime frustrations. The trouble is, this isn't what real managers do — at least, it's not what the effective ones do.

In business, as well as the liturgy committee, the real duty of the person in charge is to make it possible for everyone else to be as productive as they can be. Chairpeople are at liturgy meetings to motivate people, to cut through the garbage and trivia, to get discussions back on track and done with, to help people make a good contribution and feel satisfied. And in fact, that's much harder than just making decisions or ordering everyone around.

It should be obvious to you by now that what we are proposing for liturgy committee governance is not very much like democracy. In fact, we think voting *per se* should play a very small part in a committee's deliberations. The job of a chairperson is not to supervise a democratic process. It's to make sure the committee gets its job done. Part of that job is to make sure that everybody is heard, and that major decisions reflect to some extent the consensus of the group. (That's especially important in committees where there are some clear sentiments that everyone is nevertheless reluctant to express.) But how well that job gets done has very little to do with democracy and a great deal to do with how well a chairperson has done groundwork before the meeting even starts, and how well he or she has established the goals for a particular meeting at the outset.

In fact, *the power to set the agenda* is probably the chairperson's single most important tool in running a successful group, and we'll address this issue more fully in the next chapter. First, there's the question of the *process* you use to choose the person you need to do the job.

## Finding the Right Person

Your group's first chairperson will inevitably be chosen by the pastor, or by the first

few stalwart members of the committee. How you evaluate, elect, draft, re-elect, or coronate this person's successors is really up to the group that writes your committee's charter. (Remember, we've included a sample charter as Appendix B, if you want to see one approach to the assignment.) As you mull this over, there are two key issues to weigh — issues for which we have no easy answers.

*First*, there's the question of how long a chairperson should serve. There are advantages to limited terms of office and regular rotation — the main one is that it's easier to get rid of a dud or a puppet. Groups shouldn't be shackled to someone who turns out to be a poor leader or who just isn't doing the job, and required retirement means that a group can, at the very least, wait around for parole. But the benefits of this safety net may well be outweighed by those of having a *good* person in for an extended run — long tenure can bring a thorough knowledge of the group's personality and give someone a chance to become truly outstanding at the job.

*Second*, there's the issue of democratic elections. Allowing a group to choose its own chairperson at regular intervals has the clear advantages of fairness and group acceptance. Adults are entitled to elect their own leaders, and they will feel better about a group in which this autonomy and judgment is recognized. In addition, in situations where the pastor or parish council imposes a choice, there is always the danger that the group will always be led by various parish favorites — who may or may not be people the group will respect. But there are dangers with democracy, too — it can lead to too much turnover, with no one getting a chance to establish a genuine leadership role. It also assumes that people know what's good for them, and there are many committee situations in which Father *would* know best. A comatose group may well need a leader they'd never choose on their own, and a crafty pastor with a good candidate he wants in charge may need to subvert the democratic process to shake things up.

When your charter addresses these and other issues concerning where subsequent chairpeople are to come from, you will inevitably take your parish's own history, personalities, and past squabbles into account. But no matter which system you decide to try, there are certain *expectations* you need to write down. Being chairperson of your parish committee is a job, and you need to do the same thing you'd do for anybody in your parish with a job: Write a job description, with some clear areas of accountability and responsibilities.

- What skills does the position of chairperson require?
- What are the goals against which someone will be evaluated?
- Who evaluates the person, and how often?
- Who hires and fires, and on what grounds?

## The Skills You Need

You probably can't write such a job description until you've given some thought to

exactly *what* good chairpeople do. The first step may simply be to realize that there are, in fact, qualifications for the job.

Your chairperson should not *necessarily* be the person who has been with the group the longest, the person who is the best educated, the person who has the best professional reputation, or the person who knows the most about liturgy. It's also not necessary for the chair to be occupied by the person who simply has more time available than anyone else — lots of extra time isn't always required. Such factors — education, longevity, popularity — will have *something* to do with how well your chairperson will do at being in charge, but they aren't the secret of success:

**Your leader should be the person who will do the best job of keeping the group moving.**

Such a person will probably be outgoing, fair, and talkative, and very sensitive to the issue of using time well. But above all, this will be someone *impatient with old business* — and if your group just wants to keep things the way they are, you don't need a liturgy committee *or* a good chairperson.

The skills a liturgy chairperson needs to keep a group moving aren't easily taught, or often recognized for what they are: *skills*. To remind chairpeople that what they have is a very complex assignment — and perhaps to help a parish staff or committee to size up potential leaders — we've devised a short analysis of the things liturgy chairpeople ought to be spending their time doing.

### ***1. You need to be a good host.***

In most respects, meetings are not like parties, but in one important respect they are: Successful meetings need just as much attention to the details of setting and hospitality as good parties. As chairperson, you are in charge of what one author on management calls “climate making”<sup>1</sup> — providing a setting in which everyone can feel at ease, work efficiently, think clearly, and have a good time.

Can you keep conversation moving when it starts to flag? Can you make people feel welcome when they walk in? Do you remember names, faces, and personal details? Do you pay careful attention to people's reactions? Do you know when people aren't having a good time? Can you get people who aren't contributing interested in some particular topic or project?

All this is really only common courtesy — you'd care about these things if you were throwing a party in your own home. Nevertheless, it's surprising how many people seem to feel that the word “meeting” means that these little niceties can be dispensed with. If you do nothing else as chairperson, you can at least be polite — not just to be a nice guy, but because indifferent chairpeople set an immediately indifferent tone for the proceedings. Why should your members care if you act like you don't?

---

1. Franklyn S. Haiman, *Group Leadership and Democratic Action* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951).

As host, you're also in charge of the practicalities, such as setting a meeting place and time. Mundane as this seems, it can have as much of an effect on your committee's motivational level as any other thing you do. It's appalling to think how many meetings take place in stuffy, dark church offices; thirty minutes without light or fresh air can hypnotize even the liveliest group. As evidence of even greater masochism, some committees decide to meet in unused school classrooms or libraries — where the chairperson (who, because of his or her position at the head of the room, is immediately awarded the subconscious role of teacher) faces the sight of adults using uncomfortable little desks and chairs. This is a meeting?

You are asking people to do work, and people work better in good conditions. *Details count.* Find a bright, well-ventilated room with a big table to sit around. Tables get the message across that you are there to accomplish things, and they also make it easier for people to refer to and pass around books and papers. If possible, get a round table; it sounds silly, but rectangular tables really do give the people who wind up seated at the ends an added element of power no matter what their official role.

Make your meeting room a friendly and comfortable place — coffee, dessert, and things to drink are great. But don't make it so comfortable and convivial (see "Home Sweet Home" at right) that it takes a half hour beyond your scheduled time to get everyone to stop talking and call the meeting to order. Set the scene

## Home Sweet Home

Some liturgy groups whose members become close friends schedule meetings over dinner or drinks at someone's house or apartment.

While this sort of closeness is a fine thing to shoot for, chairpeople should insist on doing business in a neutral setting.

First, meeting rooms (if well equipped) are better than living rooms for imposing a certain discipline on discussions. They communicate to the group that you're there to concentrate and not to let the discussion wander. (You may feel like shooting the bull, but others in your group may not be in the mood to kill a whole evening every time you meet.) Second — and again, this may sound harsh to you — people who host a meeting in their home, particularly if they do it regularly, acquire a certain extra degree of power in the group whether they realize it or not. They become *de facto* leaders — and why complicate the issue of who's in charge? Third, there's the simple question of making new members feel comfortable. While opinions may differ, many committee members will, when joining a group for the first time, find coming to someone's private home an additional barrier that compounds the already existing challenge of joining a new group. Home meetings may wind up excluding people who may not already be your friends.

Please don't get us wrong. We think meetings, even in a meeting room, should have refreshments and be comfortable, and regular dinners together are a great idea. But we hope you decide to separate the actual meeting portion of the work from the socializing.

so that people are comfortable and can have some fun, but are also encouraged to get things done briskly. The real recreation time should be afterwards — it's a great incentive to get the meeting done with early, and people who need to leave for home promptly can do so without guilt.

## ***2. You must be good at describing and verbalizing.***

This is a very difficult skill to define — but it is the one which, perhaps more than any other, can keep a meeting on track.

Why? On the one hand, because a good describer and summarizer serves as a role model for the other members of the group, and sets a tone for all its discussions. The key business of your committee, after all, is articulating reactions and evaluations — someone who can, in turn, listen to an overly emotional reaction and turn someone's inarticulate reactions *into something that can be talked about* is a rare leader indeed.

Second, the skills of repeating and articulating help enormously in managing whatever conflicts erupt regarding liturgical matters. Chairpeople can help defuse many a heated argument by serving as the person who repeats, rephrases, and subtly reshapes what is going on. People in an argument are rarely arguing about what they *say* they're arguing about. By carefully repeating and expanding on what they are saying, you don't just wear them down — you help focus the issue in a way that may be helpful to the group. In addition, a chairperson who can stay calm and keep describing helps provide a sense that the conflict in question is not an all-enveloping or unmanageable one. Without that sense, a simple conflict can pick up speed as fast as a boulder rolling downhill.

The skill of describing and reflecting is not an easy one to develop. Examples might only mislead you and are no substitute for watching someone who's good at it in action. Plenty of people try to be good articulators; most of them wind up sounding like the stereotypical California therapist, parroting back every comment prefaced by "What I hear you saying is...." You're not supposed to be a shrink; you are supposed to help people say what they really mean, and defuse overheated conflict by clarifying the real issues at stake. When selecting a chairperson, don't look for someone who does the best job of saying what's agreeable to everyone, but someone who says things in a way that puts the issues in a new light.

Since the chairperson needs to play the role of chief repeater and verbalizer for the group, it's obvious that the pitfall is engaging in what's called defensive communication: evaluating, rather than describing, what you see going on in the meeting. Slipping from description into evaluation is easy, and the differences are subtle. Since you are bound to have opinions about most of the issues under discussion (and about the people you're listening to), you'll have a constant tendency to let those opinions slip.

No one's saying you can't keep those opinions. But if you're going to describe them, do just that — describe *your* feelings and opinions, don't evaluate someone else's. Perhaps you've noticed, either at work or at home, how many more good ideas seem to emerge when they aren't immediately met with critical evaluation. Good ideas are what your committee is in business to bring out. That means they're worth keeping your mouth shut for.

### ***3. You are in charge of finding the expertise and resources your group needs.***

It is not necessary for a liturgy chairperson to be the most liturgically knowledgeable member of the group (in fact, as we suggested in Chapter 3, it's probably best that he or she not be). But there is an important need for the chairperson to know the subject of liturgy well enough to distinguish expertise from hokum, and to know where to go to get answers and resources. All the members of your committee should be taking time to educate themselves on liturgy: going to liturgies, reading, even traveling. It's important for the chairperson to do this too, but in his or her case the goal is keeping an eye out for resources the committee might find useful.

Examples: If your diocese has a liturgy office, your chairperson should meet the people there, know their strengths and weaknesses, and find out if there are any services, training, or funds the parish might want to make use of. What about your neighboring parishes? It's invaluable for your chairperson to have a few contacts there — not just because they may be useful when you're involved in a personnel search, but for what might be called competitive information: What kind of music do they have? How much do they pay their musicians? What are *their* problems?

Chairpeople need to start their own little files and lists on a variety of topics. Overall, the church doesn't have a very good system of referring you to the people you'll need to advise you or do professional work for you; as chairperson, you'll have to do that yourself. When you see a successful church renovation, or an attractive set of altar vessels, find out who was responsible and *file it away*. When you hear a terrific music group somewhere else in town, go meet them and find out if they have friends who might be available to work in your parish. Are you on the mailing lists of all the people who publish liturgical music and books? Do you hear about all the workshops and courses in your area? Chairpeople have to like to collect information — and they need to recognize that parishes will never survive by being parochial.

Even within the committee itself, chairpeople need to develop the resources they need, and build them if they don't already have them. If an issue comes up in a meeting about what's liturgically "legal" and what isn't, you, as chairperson, are going to have to have somewhere to turn for an answer, and you're going to want to have confidence that you're not being sold a bill of goods. If that means knowing the liturgy documents yourself, then learn them. If it means finding someone you

can trust who *does* know them, that's fine too. Just remember that finding and nurturing experts within the group is part of the job.

#### ***4. You are in charge of managing the group's level of conflict.***

Notice that we said *managing* conflict — not avoiding it.

Any action that requires open struggle is in almost all cases undesirable, and results in clouding and misconstruing the idea and value of conflict.<sup>2</sup>

The first part of that statement is probably dear to the heart of most chairpeople. They think their job is to prevent, delay, and even paper over conflict on liturgical matters. And when it's open conflict — meaning bitter, personal, unproductive conflict — they're obviously right. Open conflict does nothing for your community, your liturgies, or your immortal souls.

But take a look at the second part of that statement, the controversial part. It implies that *conflict has value*. Groups without conflict are as tiresome and unproductive as faith without doubt. Most committees without a good scrap now and then about a substantive issue have probably reached this state of nirvana by carefully avoiding any discussion that might be regarded as interesting.

Part of the chairperson's job is to take constant readings on conflict — to start up a bit of a row where there isn't one, to get serious conflict out of the meeting (where it can only cause damage), and to identify the real conflicts where, on the surface, there is only petty squabbling about details and personalities. There are two secret weapons to help in this process.

*Creative troublemaking.* Chairpeople should react against smugness, boredom, and inactivity at the earliest opportunity. Be sly. Place some new topics on the agenda — and include a few that some people will find threatening. Keep people off balance by asking them to participate in activities that they aren't usually a part of — or to attend a liturgy for which they do not particularly care. In the midst of one of the group's favorite arguments, propose a truly outrageous solution. Assign some reading you think many people will disagree with. Ask the unexpected question. All these things can be accomplished without personal affront, and without ruining your credibility — if they're done sparingly, and only when you get the real sense that things need to be shaken up.

*Conflict management.* Meetings are not for arguing. They are not for hammering out compromises. They are for allocating resources, for establishing a sense of common purpose, and, most important, for assigning work to the people who will actually get things done.

Your first defense against most unproductive conflict — as we've said repeatedly — is to set the boundaries for your committee's work before you even begin the

---

2. Stephen P. Robbins, *Managing Organizational Conflict* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 23. An outstanding book if you're interested in the idea of creative conflict.



meeting. Most fights are about things that are not the committee's business — or are not the committee's business at that particular meeting. If it's not on the agenda, if it's not an area defined in your committee's charter, if it's a matter that belongs to one of your working groups, assert your authority and get the discussion over with.

The goal is to get serious conflict *out of big groups*; meetings where destructive conflict isn't snuffed out when it starts are like a dry forest waiting for a match. When you see an unresolvable argument erupting — about liturgical change, about personalities, about whatever your group loves to fight about — what you want to do nine times out of ten is get it off the floor and get it resolved privately.

Chairpeople, confronted by what has become an angry mob, can take a variety of actions, but most important are what might be called pacification skills. Watch an experienced conflict manager in a tense situation; he or she will probably simply begin describing how they feel (tense, under pressure, upset). On the surface, this seems ridiculous — after all, who really cares? Yet there is method in the madness. In the first place it gets some statements out onto the floor that no one can disagree with — in the heat of an argument, this is no small accomplishment. In the second place, it slows things down; as statements that are by definition non sequiturs, descriptions of how you feel get some people thinking about how *they* feel — or maybe even feeling sorry for you, since you say you are feeling so bad. Third, it gives you a chance to propose that where the conflict really needs to be resolved is after the meeting — by a small group of those involved, by you and an individual privately, or by a third party. At the next meeting of the group, you can discuss how the issue has been resolved, or propose some concrete choices to the group.

This fast footwork shouldn't come off looking like you sidestepped the conflict. It should enable those involved in the conflict to feel that their gripes or complaints will in fact be heard and acted on. The point is to localize the damage, get it out of the meeting setting, give people a chance to cool off, and move the problem to a venue where you're back in charge of the situation. Form a subcommittee; have people go do work; you stay in touch with them while they're working. When their report gets back to the meeting, you'll have had a chance to form a strategy for managing the conflict.

### ***5. You need to establish the size of the issues to be discussed.***

The group you're in charge of will have its own particular style of doing business. Groups have personalities: excitable, lethargic, vindictive, uncomfortable. That personality will also determine how they approach discussions. Some groups — through contentiousness or sheer talkativeness — can latch onto almost anything and be ready to chew on it for hours. Others are too polite (or insecure) to be able to get a good discussion going on even the most crucial of issues.

In addition, every committee is at a particular level of expertise, experience, and self-confidence. Some have worked together over a long period, done some study projects, and are ready for a tough challenge. Others, particularly new groups, instead need to have a few small victories, or to gain experience working together in some projects that don't require a great deal of subtle judgment.

As the group's leader, you're responsible for its efficiency in discussions, and that means your job during the meeting (and when writing the agenda) is to find the most productive scale on which to discuss the items that come up, and to define problems and issues in a way that suits the group's skill level and experience.

Take a group that inflates every issue to the most cosmic level possible: the question of the seeming indifference of the ushers becomes, say, an unguided tour of sexism in the church, parish personalities, and lots of old business. As chairperson, you'll need to deal with this particular habit; your role will, therefore, often be that of limiting the problem. Quickly, while the group is just getting revved up for a long night of it, you'll have to picture in your mind the appropriate "size" for this issue — a size big enough to deal with the point in question but small enough to mean that a discussion can actually have a beginning, middle, and end (ideally, all within fifteen minutes).

Scaling issues down to a more manageable size, of course, can make it less likely that you'll get a really big change out onto the floor for discussion. Plenty of groups have this problem as well, discussing issues so petty that the net potential effect on their parish's liturgies is incalculably small. "Muddling through" like this has its points: It means you'll avoid major mistakes. Yet your responsibility as chairperson is to break through this level of trivia, if you believe your group is ready for the challenge. If people are griping about the ushers again, it may be productive to talk about the whole issue of hospitality, rather than just picking over the same old hash. Details can be handled by individuals; find issues that are big enough that you need an entire committee to deal with them.

Will you find someone with all these leadership qualifications and skills? If you don't, you can at least choose someone who seems open enough (and a tough enough self-critic) to be willing to work on them. How to manage a meeting while it is happening is a skill you can learn through experience. To learn it, though, you at least need to recognize that it *is* a skill — and realize that once the meeting's under way, chairpeople are in fact working constantly, taking the group's temperature and trying to make slight adjustments in the meeting's pace and mood. That means that someone who needs to be everyone's pal may not be a good choice; neither is the person who isn't willing to use a sense of humor to keep everyone loose. Your best candidates may well be the people who simply want to get good at the skill of group leadership — and know that if the group's not producing, the buck stops with them.