



Implementing a project: the role of a Steering Committee

What is a Steering Committee?

As the name suggests, a Steering Committee helps to steer a project through from start to completion. Sometimes it might be formed entirely by staff from the organisation developing and implementing the project, but more usually it is made up of representatives of key organisations who are partners in the project, and/or who have particular expertise to lend to the project, and/or whose clients are the intended users of the output of the project. It is very important (and useful) to include at least one client of the service, or potential user of the project that is being developed, as their views can be helpful in ensuring that the project is correctly targeted.

A Steering Committee should be helpful to the Project Manager, not a distraction, so membership should be considered carefully.

What is the role of a Steering Committee?

The Steering Committee's role is to provide advice, ensure delivery of the project outputs and the achievement of project outcomes. This may include such tasks as:

- Providing input to the development of the project, including the evaluation strategy;
- Providing advice on the budget;
- Defining and helping to achieve the project outcomes;
- Identifying the priorities in the project – where the most energy should be directed;
- Identifying potential risks;
- Monitoring risks;
- Monitoring timelines;
- Monitoring the quality of the project as it develops;
- Providing advice (and sometimes making decisions) about changes to the project as it develops.

The Steering Committee provides support, guidance and oversight of progress. Members do not usually work on the project themselves. Generally, the Project Manager, and other members of the Project Team, actually do the work implementing the project.

The Project Manager will normally attend meetings of the Steering Committee to report on progress and answer any questions raised by members. It's useful to have an additional person (such someone else working on the project or an administrative staff member) attend to assist the Project Manager by recording the minutes and decisions of the meeting.



What role do individual members perform?

Individual Steering Committee members are not directly responsible for managing project activities, but provide support and guidance for those who do. So, individually, Steering Committee members should:

- Understand the aim, strategy and intended outcomes of the project;
- Appreciate the significance of the project for their own organisation and clients;
- Be genuinely interested in the project and the outcomes that are intended;
- Be an advocate for the project by doing what they can to promote its outputs;
- Have a broad understanding of project management issues.

In practice, this means they:

- Ensure the strategy that is planned matches the aim of the project;
- Consider how they will know if the aim of the project has been achieved;
- Review the progress of the project against the milestones set;
- Consider ideas and issues raised;
- Provide guidance to the project team;
- Help balance conflicting priorities and resources;
- Foster positive communication outside of the Committee regarding the project's progress and outcomes;
- Actively promote the outputs of the project;
- Contribute to the evaluation of the project, both the process of developing and implementing the project, and its actual impact on its intended audience.

One member of the Steering Committee – not a representative of the organisation who “owns” the project – should be elected Chair, to ensure that meetings run smoothly and achieve their objectives.

As members are selected based on their individual knowledge and skills that they bring to the Committee, there can be some confusion and conflict in the accountability of members. The first responsibility of members is the achievement of the project's success, and secondly to their organisation. This should be made very clear at the outset. Similarly, members who have expertise in a particular area should avoid taking a narrow view of their responsibility on the Committee – they are on the Committee to contribute to the entire project.

Sometimes it's useful to prepare a simple role description for members of the Steering Committee which sets out the expectations of them and the commitment that will be required both in time and in practical assistance that their organisation can offer to the project, such as distributing the resource produced, or promoting the outcome of the project to clients.



How often should a steering committee meet?

This is determined by the size and scale of the project. For smaller projects it's usually sufficient to meet once at the planning stage, then again mid-way through the project to monitor progress, and then once more at the end to assess the outcomes of the project and contribute to the evaluation.

For larger projects, the Committee should plan their meetings to coincide with milestones achieved in the project.

It's a good idea to set dates for the meetings in advance and seek commitment from the members of the Committee to attend every meeting. Again, depending on the size of the project, you might want to invite each participating organisation to nominate a Steering Committee member and an alternate who can attend in place of the first nominee if required.

What happens before each meeting?

At least a week before the meeting the Project Manager should circulate papers for the meeting to all Committee members. These should include:

- An agenda, indicating the time planned for the meeting, so that members can allow sufficient time to attend and participate;
- Minutes of the last meeting, including an action list, ideally updated with any information to hand about actions completed or in progress;
- A progress report on the status of the project since the last meeting;
- Any other documents to be considered at the meeting, if any, particularly drafts of resources that are being developed in the project, if relevant.

What happens at the Steering Committee meetings?

The Project Manager usually chairs the meetings. The Chair will conduct the meeting according to the agenda, ensuring that all members are encouraged to provide input throughout the meeting and that any decisions or recommendations are adequately resolved and agreed to by the members.

It's important to check through the list of action items from the previous meeting, confirming action taken and issues resolved, and agreeing how to progress any actions that aren't completed.

What happens after each meeting?

As soon as possible following the meeting, and no later than within a week, a copy of the minutes of the meeting should be circulated to all members. At a minimum, the decisions and action points should be circulated as soon as possible after the meeting. This is important both for ensuring that the minutes accurately reflect the decisions and discussions of the meeting, and to get members moving on the actions they have agreed to implement. 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 minutes should include a list of the actions agreed at the meeting, clearly labelled with the name of the individual responsible for each action and the expected timeline for implementation.

Copies of any additional documentation circulated at the meeting should also be included.

Details of the next meeting should be noted clearly.

A Steering Committee won't actually run the project for you, but if the members are selected and briefed appropriately and well, and involved to their potential throughout the life of the project, it can have a very positive impact on the achievement of your project aim.