

THOUGHTS ON MANAGING THE COMMISSION PROCESS

Jack Needleman

*Adjunct Associate Professor of Economics and Health
Policy in the Department of Health Policy and Management*

A. WHAT IS THE TASK?

1. Be clear about what are the expected products. Communicate this to members. Obtain agreement and commitment to the task.

B. HOW DO YOU GET COMMITMENT TO ACT?

1. If members are representatives or spokespersons, then their primary commitment is to the defense of their constituency.
2. Therefore, there is a need to build commitment to one another and to completing the task. This can be extremely difficult. It is a group process. One cross-over or statesman can change the dynamic.
3. Who do the staff and consultants work for? Clarify their relationship to the chair, other members, executive director, and legislature and executive branches.
4. Process requires recognition that final decisions will be made by executive or legislative branches using outcomes of advisory commissions.

Likelihood of action *is greater* if commission recommendations reflect strong (or nearly unanimous) consensus. This often makes commission processes conservative -- producing marginal or incremental change, not radical proposals -- especially when the commission members are representatives of various groups.

An alternative to processes of building consensus occasionally is seen when a bare majority or minority stakes out a position for the future or builds an audience or credibility for more extreme/extensive proposals. In these cases, commission reports are used as a forum for presenting a case and getting out data. Proponents are "trading off" short term enactment possibilities for longer-term promotion of a currently less acceptable proposal.

5. What if you can't get the commission to make policy proposal (act)?

One of the strongest factors in discouraging commissions from recommending actions is fear that the initiative will fail, if attempted. It is critical to identify sources of fear of failure, test these fears, and build confidence that programs can be successfully implemented. If all else fails, consider changing the task. Find an alternative use for a "stuck" commission.

C. ADOPT A STRATEGIC MODEL OF THE PROCESS BY WHICH THE COMMISSION WILL MOVE TO DECISION

PROBLEM FIRST, THEN GOALS AND VALUES, DEFINE OPTIONS LAST

1. The advantages of this approach are that it can unfreeze positions, build commitment to action, test the utility of options in terms of how closely they move you toward your goals.
2. Often commissions are formed to evaluate options that have been put forward and there are strong advocates -- on both sides -- of the proposal on the commission. This process allows advocates to back away from pre-formed opinions.

3. Goals and values will conflict. Early discussion of goals and values can help clarify *which* goals or concerns should have priority.
4. Structure the "trade offs." All solutions have downsides.

Be aware of the potential to become paralyzed by the quest for a solution with only upsides/no downsides.

Problems are not a reason to reject a solution. It is critical to identify potential problems and assess both whether they can be mitigated and whether one can live with the problems that remain.

Prioritize innocents. Who should public policy most profit?

D. THINK TACTICALLY ABOUT THE PROCESS BY WHICH THE COMMISSION WILL OPERATE

1. Model the decision-making.

On what issues will decisions "turn?"

What will people need to know? Want to know? What do people already know? Where are they "coming from?" This will influence what types of technical information and analysis people need and when in the process they will need it.

2. Meetings must be effective.

Lay out an overall sequenced plan for the commission's work. Make sure members understand the logics of the plan.

There needs to be an honest broker. If it is not the chair, then staff or some other commission member or consultant must play this role.

Use subcommittees to tackle tough issues and start building consensus.

Good process is critical.

3. Achievement does not only happen in meetings. Success is built between meetings.

What should happen between meetings?:

- Identify and clarify the "true" positions and concerns of parties, free of rhetoric.
- Test solutions.
- Push and encourage members.

Use informal meetings, one-on-one's and subcommittees for these tasks. Dynamics will be different from those in larger group.

4. To mix metaphors: remember that process is a floating crap game and, as in pool, you need to be thinking about the shot after next.

You are usually walking into existing long-term working relationships among parties that have served together on other bodies. Find out about these.

Build a base for the next commission or task force.