So You Are On a Committee!

Part I

Boy Scout officials often meet men who say proudly, "Oh, yes, I'm in Scouting. On the district committee, I think. I don't know just why they have it, but you fellows seem to think it's necessary."

A committeeman who doesn't know why he's needed? This may sound ridiculous to you, but a newcomer often finds more fog than he expects.

Like a parachutist dropped in a strange desert, **your first job on a committee is to get your bearings.**

That includes **determining the committee's objectives**. If objectives are vague, insist they be made clear.

You may find your committee's broad objective spelled out in the bylaws and still not know what specific targets are now on the horizon. Almost every lodge and service club has a boys' work committee, for example, with duties delineated in literature from its national office; but the literature can't tell precisely what your committee's projects are for this year.

So **ask questions. Press for clear answers**. Is your group supposed to be judging, investigating, advising, planning, or creating? Your questions may stir up thought, which is unsettling but healthy.

Each member should take that slice of the work which interests him most, or which he can do best. But he isn't always told, unless he asks, what the committee thinks he can do. Whatever it is in your case-potent connections, a sharp pencil at figuring costs, a shrewd eye for legal pitfalls-the sooner you know, the better.

If you're a newcomer, the old-timers will be **sizing you up**. Don't seem too shy or too brash. If the whole committee is new, the problem is multiplied. Of course, the chairman's job includes melting these invisible barriers, but he needs help.

Eugene Peckham in Dynahelps for Democratic Leaders stresses the need for quickly fusing "just a gathering of people" into a team and advises new committeemen to get this process started. His first suggestion is **"Come early."** Locate the meeting place. Familiarize yourself with its facilities.

Before the meeting is called to order, chat with every member, if you can. This gives you a chance to mention who you are and why you're interested and to evoke similar information from the others. If you do this casually, with a smile, you'll no longer be a stranger by the time the meeting starts.

"Silence is the virtue of fools," wrote Francis Bacon. It certainly isn't golden in a committee meeting. A silent committeeman may learn a lot, but he contributes nothing-and may dampen the spirit of others.

In asking questions, don't worry about sounding naive. The others know you're new. They'll welcome your questions as a sign of interest, and your fresh approach may light up something they overlooked.

Before long you can **start expressing opinions**. Not lengthily, of course, nor bluntly, but helpfully. Unless someone else has adequately stated the same opinion, say what you think about every issue that comes up. Perhaps you can do it as Ben Franklin did:

"When another asserted something that I thought an error, I denied myself the pleasure of contradicting him abruptly... I began by observing that in certain circumstances his opinion would be right, but in the present case there appeared or seemed to me some difference."

Paul L. Johnson, seasoned committeeman in a dozen civic enterprises and full-time executive of Pacific Telephone Company, jots down every opinion and suggestion voiced at every meeting. After a while he synthesizes and points up what others have said, the areas of agreement and disagreement, and his own judgment in the light of his experience.

Chairmen often have trouble, and you can help. If you see that Jones is too shy to speak, you can say, "I'd like to hear what Mr. Jones thinks about this." If the conversation strays off the subject, you can herd it back. If someone has a good point but isn't getting through to the others, you can tactfully rephrase it so they grasp it. If another member doesn't understand the committee's aims, tip off the chairman so he can enlighten him or ask you to do so.

Another, more subtle help you can give is simply to **show enthusiasm.**

Let everyone see that you're interested and loyal.

There are many ways to be obnoxious in committee work. They include heckling, second-guessing, monologuing, dogmatizing, pontificating, belittling, and quarrelling. No committeeman tries to be obnoxious but many are, without trying. To avoid it keep a hard eye on yourself, a tight rein on your ego, and an open mind.

Another group of errors-genial ones-might be labelled **distractions**. Telling a long, involved story; starting a debate on a side issue; joking with a neighbour while a colleague is speaking. Watch yourself, and don't take offence if someone says, "We aren't getting very far with the meeting's business." Meetings are faster and more fruitful when everyone sticks to the subject and saves funny stories for the coffee klatch.

A third type of mistake is **over-helpfulness**. Many chairmen are inexperienced, uneasy, and self-conscious. A helpful remark that implies criticism may throw them into a tizzy. If you think your chairman needs advice, speak to him in private and with tact.

If you offer advice in open meeting, he may be upset not only at the implied rebuke but at interference with his program. He can give your ideas more judicious thought if he hears them in a quiet corner. And if he turns down your proffered help, you won't have been publicly squelched.

Another error is inviting somebody to join the committee-or, more commonly, asking the committee to invite him-without first consulting the chairman alone. He knows what kind of people he wants. There may be reasons, which he can't state openly, for not wanting your candidate.

How about committee members who talk too much? And how should you behave if you're in the minority? These are two of the questions to be discussed in our next issue.

PART II

Some committeemen talk too much-without knowing it. How to recognize and curb this in yourself: How to behave when you're in a minority.

In Part I we discussed how the new committeeman can comfortably fit into a group. We also told of common mistakes made by committee members. Those blunders are easy to make, but also easy to avoid- when you understand protocol.

One other mistake, however, is ubiquitous and persistent: **talking too much.**

It's hard for a talker to know how much is too much. Enthusiasm and good ideas are welcome to any committee. Good or not, ideas are welcome to any chairman who understands the democratic process. But many a man becomes as gabby as a circus barker without ever realizing it. Logorrhea, like halitosis, is a fault that friends are loathe to mention. How can one detect it in oneself?

If you notice people fidgeting or staring into space when you talk, you talk too much. If a chairman politely cuts in-"We appreciate the contributions you've made, but I suggest you hold your other points until later," or if you are several times asked to speak briefly, it may dawn on you. A major offender will sooner or later be chided by the chairman or someone else, or quietly dropped. But even when you're aware of your bad habits it's hard to correct.

Eugene Peckham in his Dynahelps for Democratic Leaders offers prescriptions to people who realize they talk too much and want to cut down. One is to put their thoughts in writing before they speak. This makes them clarify and condense and gives other people more time to be heard.

Ask a question-lower voice

Another is to ask a question rather than launch into a statement. The question can be framed to draw the statement out of someone else, usually in shorter form.

A third is simply to lower the voice. "The chances are you have a strident voice," Peckham says, "or you wouldn't so successfully overwhelm others who want to talk. Turn down your volume."

The garrulous are chronic interrupters. "Practise yielding," Peckham says. "When someone tries to interrupt you, let him. When a silence falls, wait for someone else to break it."

If you can do that, you've kicked the habit.

If you're in the minority

Harmony is sweet. It's almost indispensable to teamwork. But harmony is a matter of atmosphere-friendliness rather than hostility. It doesn't mean that members always agree.

In fact, a good working rule is that majorities are usually wrong-at first. New ideas stick in the craw. Old ideas seem sacred. Emotions and personalities trample logic. Vital facts are often invisible (no committee ever has all the facts).

Therefore, it's a duty of a good committee member to question everything silently and to speak when answers continue to elude him. Why is this being done? Why this way? Are there better ways? Are pertinent facts ignored?

Most of us shrink a little from asking such questions. We know our colleagues prefer to feel that everyone agrees with them. As Ordway Tead points out, even in the midst of disagreeing, most of us abhor disagreement. For the sake of peace and the approval of others, we tend to keep quiet. But in our stronger moments we remember Abraham Lincoln's stern reminder, "To sin by silence when they should protest makes cowards out of men."

Your protests can be couched as mild questions, thus ruffling fewer feathers. A question can be a welcome stimulant to a fair-minded committee. Figuring out the answer may lead people to change their view. On the other hand, their answer may explain their view so you yourself agree with it.

Cracking tough nuts

But sometimes your quizzing will leave you still in disagreement. What then?

First, of course, you need to re-examine your own thinking. How does it look from the other side. Are you sure of your facts? Is your opposition based on a pet theory or a pet peeve. Our own rationalizing has a way of sounding very rational to ourselves. Try to think it out and perhaps talk it out with some frank friend, before you plant yourself firmly in a minority stance.

Having done all this, don't back down because the majority is unmoved. If the good of your group demands that the others change their opinion, it's up to you to persuade them. How you'll do it depends on the situation. There are times to fight, times to explain, times to conciliate.

Be a John Brown

Sometimes the majority is merely apathetic. The boys' work committee of a service club was plodding comfortably along, taking a few orphans to ball games and giving them a Christmas party. But one member, John Brown, got excited about the work of a youth centre in the worst part of town. It faced bankruptcy. He urged his committee to dash to the rescue. But the other committeemen thought this too much trouble for a small group of boys.

It was John Brown's fiery, table-thumping enthusiasm that finally broke them down. He told stories of boys the centre was helping. He reminded them that these boys' parents would never support such an enterprise. "That's why it's a blighted area," he barked. "These kids will rot in the alleys if we let the centre close."

He advocated a bigger, stronger centre, which the service club could promote. To clinch it, he had figures at his fingertips. He proved that all this could be done with the committee's available budget. He swept everyone along with him, and the club eventually took deep pride in the project. But if Brown had been quiet and patient, the youth centre would have died.

Or a Chinese fighter

Sometimes it's better to roll with the punches and conciliate an angry majority rather than fight it. (A Chinese proverb says, "By fighting you never get enough, by yielding you get more than you expected.") For example, a church board was told, correctly, that a Scout troop chartered by the church had broken new chairs in the recreation hall and had torn the carpet. The board exploded. It decreed that the troop must meet elsewhere.

Boys will be boys, as their fathers know. Two fathers were on the church board. They also knew that the elderly majority of the board would not consider boyishness an extenuation for damaged property. So these minority members counselled with the Scoutmaster and his troop committee and later with the Scouts.

All hands were ashamed of the damage, eager to fix it, and glad to promise that rough games would henceforth be played only outdoors. This news was taken to the church board. In addition, the troop proposed to include service to its sponsor as part of its activities in the future, beginning by rebinding the church's old hymn books. This compromise mollified the board, so the troop wasn't banished.

Fall back and regroup

Now let's examine the minority member. He isn't always right, although the human brain is so constructed that he usually thinks he is. And when he is, sometimes surrender is smart. Being a loyal loser isn't always cowardly. It may be better to let a group make a mistake that to try to stop it.

For example, a Y.M.C.A. leader planned a camping trip to a lake where canoes were available. But an unsupervised canoeist had drowned there in the recent past. So the camp committee was dead set against any canoeing for its boys. The leader was saddened, because he was an expert aquatics man and a strict enforcer of safety rules. He might have forced the committee to let them use canoes by threatening not to go unless they did.

But he applied a lesson of history pointed out by Liddell Hart in his book Strategy: "The most satisfactory peace settlements, even for the stronger side, proved to be those made by negotiation rather than by a decisive military issue." The camp leader knew that imposing his will on the committee might make them so angry that they wouldn't work with him in the future. He dropped the issue. The canoes weren't worth a major battle. A year later the committee let him use them.

Before you force an issue, ask yourself: Is a principle at stake?

H. A. Overstreet's *The Mature Mind* points out the significance of this question:

On a tablet in front of the Old South Meeting House, in Boston, are words that describe our Revolutionary forefathers as "worthy to raise issues." They knew which things were important and which were unimportant. A person has to be mature to be worthy to raise issues. Most of the small frictions in life that destroy mutual confidence and enjoyment come from raising issues that are not worth raising-and most of the social inertias and timidities that keep our world from moving toward its ideals express a reluctance to raise issue that should be raised.