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Working in Committees and Teams

'A camel is a horse designed by a committee' (Anon.)

First law of committo-dynamics: Comitas comitatum, omnia comitas.

The Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) is, by Western Australian standards, a large organization with a very complex and diverse mission to fulfil. It has a fairly 'flat' structure allowing people to get on with their job with a minimum of fuss. The structure also allows people to specialize. DEC has a policy of promoting teams both as a means of ensuring that decisions are based on the best available information and expertise, and as a means of promoting morale and a feeling of 'belonging'. Science Division encourages group decision-making about planning, resources and integration via Project Teams.

Jokes and sayings about committees abound. Committees are common, partly because in our complex society with more and more information and specialization, they are often the only way to attain integration or agreement and they can be a very effective way of canvassing diverse interests and views in the process of making decisions.

Most professional and many technical staff in DEC will be asked to join committees and teams from time to time. Learning how to be effective in a committee is important. There are a few rules that should assist you in making a positive contribution and wasting as little of your time as possible.

1. *Second law of Committo-dynamics: 'The less you enjoy serving on committees, the more likely you are to be pressed to do so'.*

Only join committees to which you can contribute. If you are asked to join a committee and you think it is outside your area of competence, discuss the request with your Program Leader or the Director of Science Division. Sometimes people are asked to join committees to represent a group (e.g. a Project Team, the Division or the Department) and in such cases your position or your willingness to represent others may be more important than your knowledge.

2. *Kennedy's comment on committees: 'A committee is twelve people doing the job of one'.*

If you can't or aren't contributing to the committee, ask the person who nominated you if you can resign.

3. *Shanahan's Law: 'The length of a meeting rises with the square of the number of people present'.*

If the committee is too big to function effectively, try and get it re-organized, e.g. by forming sub-committees with clearly defined tasks.

4. *Hutchin's Law: 'You can't out-talk someone who knows what he is talking about'.*

Do your homework. Read and study any papers that have been distributed and ensure that you have completed any actions agreed at the previous meeting. Study the agenda and ensure that you are able to contribute to it. Look up information that you may require.

5. *Kim's rule of committees: 'If an hour has been spent amending a sentence, someone will move to delete the paragraph'.*

Be constructive. Much time in committees is wasted because people are negative or nit-picking.

6. *Courtois' Rule: 'If people listened to themselves more often, they would talk less'.*

Don't monopolize a subject; listen to other points of view. If you disagree with them, don't be aggressive and say "you're wrong" but try to get them to change their mind by saying "are you aware of" or "have you considered ...". Personality clashes make for unproductive committees and waste everyone's time. Body language is important. Look interested (even if you are trying not to fall asleep or wish you were somewhere else).

7. *Truman's Law: 'If you can't convince them, confuse them'.*

Be ready to compromise, but not at the expense of watering down what you consider to be important principles. If there is continuing disagreement, the committee

should seek policy guidance from the person who set it up.

8. *Hendrickson's Law: 'If a problem causes many meetings, the meetings eventually become more important than the problem'.*

Try and get the task completed as soon as possible and move to dissolve the committee. There should be very few committees that do not have a termination date.

9. *Third law of Committo-dynamics: 'Those most opposed to serving on a committee will be made chairpersons'.*

If you are chairing a committee it is your task to see that it runs efficiently. Ensure that goals and tasks are clearly defined. If a job is too

complex for all committee members to handle in committee (e.g. drafting a report), form a small sub-committee and ensure it reports back on time. Keep members to the agenda. Set a finishing time for each meeting and stick to it. Get the minutes or summary record out quickly and ensure that they include any agreed actions. Try to defuse any personality clashes. If the committee is going nowhere, tell the person that set it up and suggest new ways of achieving the aim.

(Laws and rules from *Murphy's law complete* by Arthur Bloch, Mandarin Paperbacks, London, 1990.)

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