A REFERENCE GUIDE

Steering

Committee

Guide

What a steering committee is, how to set one up, what it decides, how it runs, and what commonly goes wrong.

J. Lynne & Co.

The patience to see it. The drive to move it.

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About this guide

This is reference material for anyone setting up or sitting on a steering committee for a significant program of work. It assumes no project management background.

What follows is common practice, not a set of rules. Organizations differ, and a smaller program can reasonably use a lighter version of any of it.

01 DEFINITION

What a steering committee is

A steering committee is a group of senior people who make the decisions a program team cannot make on its own, and who take responsibility for the program's direction.

The defining function is decision-making. A group that only receives information is operating as an audience. A group that meets only when something has gone wrong is operating as an escalation route. Both have uses, and neither is steering.

Why it matters

Three things happen at a steering committee that do not reliably happen anywhere else.

1. It makes the work visible. Decisions about a major program reach well beyond the project team — staff whose jobs change, departments whose budgets move, and often the members, customers, students, or public the organization serves. The committee is where those decisions get made with the affected areas in the room, rather than inside the project where nobody outside can see them.

2. It holds the line. Every program gets asked to add things, move dates, and accept changes that each look small on their own. The committee is where the line is drawn and then defended — not because change is bad, but because someone has to weigh each request the same way, over a year or more, and be willing to say no.

3. It is where accountability sits. When a program goes well or badly, the question that follows is who was responsible for the direction it took. The committee is the answer to that question, and it is a fairer answer than “the project team” — because the project team was never in a position to decide most of what determined the outcome.

Typical responsibilities

– Approving changes to scope, budget, and schedule above agreed limits.

– Resolving trade-offs when two areas of the organization want different things.

– Accepting a phase as complete.

– Accepting risk on the organization’s behalf.

– Deciding whether the program continues, pauses, or stops.

– Escalating to the board or executive committee where required.

What normally sits outside it

– Day-to-day delivery decisions, sequencing, and technical design.

– How an individual area chooses to run its own process within an agreed scope.

– Whether a piece of work is technically correct, which is a testing question.

– Anything the board has reserved to itself.

Other groups you may hear about

Organizations use several overlapping names for groups around a program. These are the ones most often confused with a steering committee.

GROUP	WHAT IT IS
Project board	Another name for the same thing. Some methods, PRINCE2 among them, use this term instead of steering committee. If your organization says project board, it usually means this.
Working group	Does the actual work and reports up to the steering committee. Members are usually the people doing the tasks rather than the people who can commit a department.

GROUP	WHAT IT IS
Program office, or PMO	Supports the program — tracking, scheduling, reporting, and preparing material for the committee. It does not make the decisions; it makes them possible to make.
Executive committee or board	Sits above the steering committee. Receives escalations and keeps certain decisions for itself, usually the largest ones.

02 GETTING STARTED

Setting one up

If you have been asked to establish a steering committee and have not done it before, the following order tends to work. Steps one to four are the ones worth spending time on; the rest follow quickly once those are settled.

A PRACTICAL SEQUENCE

1. Confirm the sponsor. One named executive who owns the outcome and will chair. Almost everything else follows from this, so if it is unsettled, settle it before going further.

2. Write down the purpose. One paragraph covering what the program must deliver and what the committee exists to decide. It becomes the first section of the charter.

3. List the areas with a genuine stake. Which parts of the organization change — their processes, their staff, their budgets? These become your seats.

4. Draft the charter. Use the outline in section 07. A first draft usually takes an afternoon and saves considerably more time later.

5. Agree the thresholds. With the sponsor, set the cost and schedule figures above which a change comes to the committee, and above which it goes to the board.

6. Confirm members and deputies. Ask each person directly whether they can commit their area, and ask them to name an authorized deputy for meetings they cannot attend.

7. Book the calendar for the whole program. Scheduling twelve months of meetings at once is far easier than arranging them individually, and it keeps the meetings from slipping when things get busy.

8. Run the first meeting on the charter itself. Approve it, confirm the thresholds, and agree what the read-aheads will contain. This gives the committee a real decision to make at its first meeting, which sets the pattern.

If the program is already underway

Establishing a committee mid-program follows the same order, with one addition: before the first meeting, ask the program team for a written summary of decisions already made and by whom. It is a reasonable request, it takes them an hour, and it prevents the new committee from unknowingly reopening or ratifying things that were settled months ago.

03 MEMBERSHIP

Who sits on it

The common test for membership is whether a person can commit their area's resources and accept a change to how it works, without seeking permission elsewhere.

On size

Most published guidance recommends five to eight members, on the grounds that larger groups find it harder to decide anything. In practice most committees are larger than that, for reasons that are hard to argue with: several areas have a real stake, senior people expect to be included, and leaving someone out can cost more in goodwill than including them costs in time.

Both things are true at once. The usual way organizations reconcile them is not to shrink the room, but to separate the group that decides from the group that attends.

CATEGORY	HOW IT USUALLY WORKS
Deciding members	Named in the charter, able to commit their area, and counted toward the quorum — the smallest number who must be present for the committee to decide anything. These are the areas whose processes, staff, or budgets are changing. Often a small group even when the meeting is large.
Standing attendees	Attend every meeting to contribute and stay informed, but are not counted toward the quorum. Usually the administrative and support functions that serve the program without owning part of the change.
By invitation	Attend for one agenda item and then leave, or receive only the part that concerns them. Common for vendors and subject specialists.

Writing the distinction into the charter tends to matter more than the headcount. If a committee has fourteen people in the room, the practical question is not how to reduce it to eight — it is which of the fourteen are deciding, and whether everyone knows which group they are in.

Making a larger committee work

– Keep the decision list short. Three decisions per meeting is a realistic ceiling for a large group.

– Circulate options and a recommendation in advance, so the meeting is spent on the choice rather than the explanation.

– Give the chair an explicit role in closing discussion and stating the decision, and record it before moving on.

– Where speed matters, some committees delegate a defined band of decisions to the sponsor and one or two others between meetings, reporting back at the next sitting.

Vendors and delivery partners

Most organizations invite vendors and implementation partners to present and answer questions, without making them permanent members of the committee.

The reason is practical: some of what a committee discusses concerns the vendor relationship itself — acceptance of deliverables, contractual change, a performance issue — and those discussions are easier with part of the meeting reserved for the organization alone. Many committees handle this by having the partner present for the first part and absent for the last.

Seats commonly filled

SEAT	ROLE ON THE COMMITTEE
Executive sponsor	Owns the outcome and usually chairs. Accountable for whether the program delivered what it was funded to deliver.
Business owners	Leaders of the areas whose processes and staff are changing. Commit resources and accept changes to how their area operates.
Technology lead	Explains what is technically possible, what it costs, and the consequences of a decision. Advisory on the outcome.
Finance	Holds the business case and advises on affordability, including the cost of delay.
Risk, audit, or compliance	Contributes from the start rather than at review points, so decisions are made with those constraints visible.

SEAT	ROLE ON THE COMMITTEE
Program manager	Brings decisions to the committee, records outcomes, and tracks actions. Usually attends without a vote.

04 AUTHORITY

What the committee decides

Writing down the boundaries of the committee’s authority before the first meeting removes most later ambiguity about who decides what.

THE COMMITTEE USUALLY DECIDES	AND USUALLY DOES NOT
Changes to scope, budget, or schedule above an agreed threshold.	Delivery choices, sequencing, and technical design.
Trade-offs between two areas that want different outcomes.	How an area runs its own process inside an agreed scope.
Whether a phase is complete and can be accepted.	Whether a deliverable is technically correct.
Acceptance of risk on the organization’s behalf.	Risks that sit wholly within one owner’s authority.
Whether the program continues, pauses, or stops.	Anything reserved to the board.

Setting thresholds

Thresholds work better as figures than as adjectives. “Significant changes come to the committee” tends to produce debate about what counts as significant; a stated cost figure and a stated number of weeks does not.

– A change above a stated cost comes to the committee. Below it, the program manager proceeds and reports.

– A change that moves a milestone by more than a stated number of weeks comes to the committee.

– A change above a second, higher figure goes to the board rather than being decided by the committee.

Agreeing the same figures with the board means both bodies know what will reach them and when.

05 PRACTICE

Running the meeting

How often it meets

Most committees meet monthly, moving to every two weeks during design, testing, and the weeks around go-live. Meetings usually run sixty to ninety minutes. Committees that meet less often than monthly tend to find that decisions got made somewhere else in between — not deliberately, just because something had to happen.

Read-aheads

Sending the read-aheads at least three working days before the meeting, and expecting people to have read them, is the one habit that most changes how the meeting itself is spent. Material written for decisions is usually shorter than material written for reporting.

WHAT READ-AHEADS USUALLY CONTAIN

1. The decisions required at this meeting, each stated as a question with options and a recommendation.

2. What has changed since the last meeting, including anything decided between meetings.

3. The main risks in plain language, with what is being done about each.

4. Spending against the original approved figure as well as against the current forecast.

5. Outstanding actions from previous meetings, with owners.

6. Anything the program team considers a concern but cannot yet quantify.

Agenda

A common structure places decisions first, while attention is highest:

– Decisions required — the majority of the time.

– Changes since the last meeting.

– Risks and issues.

– Financial position.

– Actions outstanding.

Recording decisions

A short decision record is the most portable output of a steering committee. Most organizations capture, for each decision:

– What was decided.

– What the alternatives were.

– What risk was accepted, and by whom.

– The date, and who was present.

One paragraph per decision is generally sufficient. The purpose is that someone can reconstruct the reasoning later without needing to ask anyone who was there.

A measure some committees track

Alongside cost and schedule, some committees record two dates for each issue raised: when the program team first identified it, and when the committee was informed. The interval between them is a useful indicator of how well information is moving, and it is straightforward to collect.

On lighter versions

Not every program needs all of this. A smaller piece of work might use the same ideas with a three-person group, a one-page read-ahead, and a thirty-minute monthly meeting. The parts most worth keeping at any size are the decision list, the threshold figures, and the written record.

06 COMMON PROBLEMS

What to watch out for

These patterns appear frequently enough to be worth knowing by name. Each is usually visible before it causes difficulty.

PATTERN	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE, AND THE USUAL CORRECTION
Meetings become briefings	Time goes on reporting and few decisions are made in the room; read-aheads grow longer while meetings grow shorter. Usually corrected by moving decisions to the top of the agenda and sending read-aheads far enough ahead to be read.

PATTERN	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE, AND THE USUAL CORRECTION
Attendance drifts	Members send delegates who cannot commit their area, so less can be decided, so attending matters less. Usually corrected by naming an authorized deputy per seat and setting a quorum.
Decisions arrive pre-made	Recommendations reach the committee without genuine alternatives attached. Usually corrected by requiring each decision paper to present at least two options and the consequences of each.
Risks stay amber	The same items sit at the same status for months without resolving or escalating. Usually corrected by attaching an owner and a review date to each risk, and defining what would move it either way.
No stopping condition	Nobody can say what would cause the program to pause, so it continues by default. Usually corrected by agreeing stopping conditions in the charter, before they are needed.
Unclear authority	Decisions are deferred because members are unsure whether they may make them. Usually corrected by the threshold figures described in section 04.
Everyone decides, so nobody does	A large committee where no one is recorded as the decision-maker, so items are revisited at the following meeting. Usually corrected by the deciding-member distinction in section 03.

07 TEMPLATE

Charter outline

A charter is typically one to three pages. The outline below covers the elements most charters contain; adapt or omit as suits the program.

ELEMENTS

1. Purpose. One paragraph on what the program must deliver and why the committee exists.

2. Authority. What the committee decides, what it escalates, and the cost and schedule thresholds that separate the two.

3. Membership. Deciding members, standing attendees, the authorized deputy for each seat, and the quorum.

4. Meeting schedule. How often the committee meets, for how long, and when read-aheads go out.

5. Decision method. How a decision is reached, who resolves a tie, and how decisions are recorded.

6. Standing read-ahead contents. What goes out before every meeting.

7. Escalation. What goes to the board, in what form, and within what period.

8. Stopping conditions. What would cause the program to pause or stop, and who may call it.

9. Review. When the charter itself is revisited.

On stopping conditions

This element is the one most often left out, and it is inexpensive to include. Agreeing in advance what would prompt a pause — and who has the standing to call one — means the question can be raised later as a matter of procedure rather than as a challenge to anyone's judgment.

ABOUT J. LYNNE & CO.

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We publish reference material of this kind for executives, boards, and program sponsors. If it is useful, you are welcome to adapt it for your own organization.

If you would like to talk

We are happy to answer questions about anything in this guide, or to look at a program you have underway.

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