Dear Friends and Clients,

Do you know how to run a committee in a way that gets thing done? And how do you direct a work group when you don’t really have a boss’s authority? Or foster collaboration among people whose goals aren’t quite the same?

Whether you’re brainstorming a startup with entrepreneurial pals, or trying to make a project team a little more efficient, leading peers can be challenging. I watched a lot of struggling groups – from trade association committees to non-profit boards – and I’m often reminded of an old cliché: managing them is like herding cats.

But it doesn’t have to be quite so hard. There are tricks to make the collective effort flow more smoothly. In this issue I’ll share strategies for leading a committee, including a few I’ll borrow from Sherry Little, a master of managing public-private partnerships.

Warm wishes, Bev

Does leading a committee make you feel like you’re herding cats?

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Much of the work getting done in today’s organizations comes from team efforts. But whether you're guiding a routine project group or acting as counsel to a blue ribbon panel, leading folks who don't report to you can be frustrating.

Sherry Little, a founding partner at the infrastructure firm Spartan Solutions, knows that leading across functional and organizational lines can feel like herding cats. But, she says, it's amazing what can be accomplished when you learn how to build and manage diverse teams.

Little’s company develops and administers large infrastructure projects, which often means fostering public-private partnerships to build things like subway systems, trolley lines, or ferries. Little learned political skills as a senior staffer in the Senate, where crafting transportation legislation required negotiating across
When I asked her to share her favorite strategies for building an effective team, Little offered four tips:

• **Start strong.** The first meeting of a new group sets the tone for the future. Not only should an initial meeting be smoothly organized, but also it should be structured so that every member leaves with a clear idea of the group's mission.

• **Allocate tasks.** Make sure every member of the work group is given something specific to do, even if it's minimal. When people don't have at least small assignments, they are more likely to sit back and criticize.

• **Track action items.** Whether an elected secretary prepares formal minutes, or participants take turns emailing timely informal notes, it's vital to keep track of action items and group decisions. All assignments should be put in writing, to keep members accountable and on the same page.

• **Explain decisions.** Even if you have broad authority, in a collaborative group you, the leader, should listen to everybody's views. Then, once you decide upon a course of action, explain the reasoning behind your decision. Little says it's particularly important to describe how you took contrary opinions into account. When team members understand and respect the process, they will feel valued. And, Little says, they'll be more likely to go along with your decision this time, and to participate positively in the next debate.

As Little illustrates, committee and team management requires a mix of, first, strong organizational skills, and, second, softer skills, like recognizing what each person needs and wants. **This set of three questions, that I call the Herding Cats Triangle, can help you define and implement your committee leadership strategy:**

1) **What's the mission?** It's important for all participants to understand why the group exists. That doesn't mean that goals can't evolve over time, but the members must always have a shared, clear view of their purpose and responsibilities. If the committee or team is part of a larger organization, be sure your activities are consistent with the bigger vision.

2) **Who are the stakeholders and what do they need?** As a starting point, learn as much as possible about each group member, including what they want out of group membership, and what interest sector they might represent. The more you know about needs and interests of participants, the easier it will be for you to foster collaboration and compromise. Beyond the immediate participants,
think about the interests of other stakeholders, because they have the potential to offer support or limit your progress. Regularly consider whether additional groups and individuals might be interested in or impacted by the group's activities.

3) Are the right meeting logistics in place? Running effective meetings is a big part of your job as leader. These points can help you draft your committee meeting checklist:

- **What's the point?** Before you send out invitations, be clear about your goals in calling a specific meeting.

- **Have an agenda.** A written list of discussion items helps to keep meetings on target. Particularly if a session involves complex issues or requires preparation, send out the agenda in advance. You can structure participation not only by delegating agenda items but also by suggesting time limits for each item.

- **Shape it.** Even informal meetings should have a structure, including at least:
  - **An opening,** in which you, the leader, state the purpose and the desired outcome,
  - **A middle,** in which discussion moves each agenda item at least a baby step forward, and
  - **A closing,** when you may sum up the conclusions, action items and assignments, and perhaps mention additional next steps.

- **Set it up.** For a successful meeting, you may have to be assertive about sending invitations and reminding participants of the details. Even if it’s a regular meeting and everybody knows the drill, specify the date, day, time and place. Remind invitees at least once again, at the last minute. And if you’re using email for invitations or reminders, put the details in the subject line.

- **Warm it up.** There’s a legitimate social component to many meetings, and you may better achieve your goals if all participants feel engaged and comfortable about offering comments. You can address some social needs and establish a cordial mood for the event by devoting the first five or ten minutes to a warm-up phase, in which everyone is invited to offer information, suggestions or concerns. This can be as simple as brief introductions, or you might request one-minute answers to a question like: “What is your most important current project?”

- **Be on time.** Invitees will behave more responsibly if they know that your meetings start and end on schedule.
• **Set the tone.** Treat all participants with courtesy, give speakers your full attention and don’t work on other projects while the meeting is going on. If you have trouble staying focused, try taking notes of the discussion.

• **Keep track.** Every meeting needs to have someone designated to keep a record, at least of key conclusions and assignments.

• **Say “thanks.”** Show that you genuinely appreciate participation, and thank people for their contributions. Thank everybody at the close of the meeting.

• **Follow it up.** After the meeting, see that both participants and invitees who couldn’t attend get a copy of the notes. Be sure that assignees have everything they need and are moving forward on their tasks. If nothing seems to come of your meetings, people will lose interest and stop taking them seriously.

• **Set the rules.** Meetings will flow more smoothly if everybody understands the ground rules. Consider building a consensus on matters like:
  - Attendance
  - Promptness
  - Participation
  - Cell phones or other interruptions
  - Confidentiality.

• **Shake it up.** If you chair a regular meeting, look for ways to vary the routine. If you change the pattern, new people may speak up, new ideas may emerge, and the discussion won’t feel so stale. Consider:
  - Special refreshments.
  - A change of venue, ranging from a festive or informal setting when it’s time to celebrate, to site visits that allow participants to focus on specific issues.
  - Outside speakers, including experts invited to share special knowledge, or consultants asked to express messages that you can’t or don’t want to deliver.

**MESSAGE FROM BEV: SAVVY CAREERISTS STAY CONNECTED.** So let’s stay in touch through Social Media. Please follow me on Twitter and connect on LinkedIn. And, if you have a work life question or an idea for an ezine or blog post, I’d love to hear from you via email.