

So you want to be a committee member...



Putting a hand up to become a member of the committee of an association or club is probably something that's crossed the mind of many members at one time or another, more often than not when having one of those "what the hell were they thinking...?" moments, or when time for the Annual General Meeting comes around.

Just thinking about jumping into what can potentially be a pit of vipers can be a vexing question, particularly if you've already had experience of committee work at a poorly run club in the past. On the other hand, if you feel that the committee you'll be joining is a great team of people you'd want to work with, and if you have the time and relevant skills to improve the club experience for all, then it should be something to be encouraged. Remember however, that our lives these days are already pretty busy, and if you don't have the extra free time you'll need for this new commitment, then don't be pressured into volunteering. It's far better not to sign up for committee work if you only have marginal free time, because whatever duties you subsequently find you don't have time to do properly are only going to have to be picked up by someone else, and the only likely outcome there is that one of your colleagues will be under the pump trying to do your work and theirs, and you'll be very unpopular.

Many members of clubs do eventually stand for committee positions during their time in these not-for-profit groups, and the reasons for doing so are varied. Some simply want the kudos that they feel goes with being a committee member, and if they have little or no experience, are often surprised at the workload and the time commitment expected of them in a dynamic organisation. Others have laudable altruistic motives, and want to bring their ideas to the table and help the club evolve in directions they favour, while others just want something to fill their free time.

As a general rule, committee members usually fall into one of two categories - those who put in the effort, pull their weight, and leave the club better for their time on the committee, and those who are only prepared to turn up occasionally at meetings but otherwise make no meaningful contribution to the running of the club.

While this sometimes works in the case of informal "pub" clubs that might fish together or play football or darts against the village up the road, the need to go beyond this style of oversight of a group becomes somewhat more involved once the club or association formally incorporates under state law.

Incorporation of an association provides certain legal protections and indemnity for both members and committees and is usually insisted upon by experienced committee members as well as by many state and national oversight organisations. It has become more or less mandatory for organised sporting bodies wishing to seek affiliation with larger groups.

In NSW for example, incorporation of associations such as sporting clubs is governed by the NSW Associations Incorporation Act administered by the Dept. of Fair Trading, and this piece of legislation comprehensively deals with the requirements for incorporating any not-for-profit group such as a sporting club.

Unless members of a particular group were originally involved in gaining incorporation for their club in the first instance, the chance is that they are less familiar than they should be with the obligations they and their committee have under the Act. Worse still, it's generally surprising how unfamiliar most club members considering nominating for committee positions are with regard to the Act, and this lack of knowledge of even the minimum obligations frequently extends to the committee office bearers and even committee presidents themselves.

So here are a few questions for anyone thinking about running for a club committee position...

- Have you read the relevant sections of the NSW Associations Incorporation Act?
- Have you compared your club's constitution (every incorporated club must have one under the Act) to the model constitution for incorporated associations available from the Office of Fair Trading?
- Do you have a vision of where you'd like your club to be one year from now... ? And more important, do you have a plan for how you can get it there?
- Are you a self starter, or do you have to be asked or directed to perform duties?
- Can you write effectively?
- Can you present a cogent argument to support (or oppose) a position on a matter?
- Are you a good listener?
- Are you sufficiently computer literate to be able to communicate with members, committee members, sponsors, state bodies and other organisations that your club routinely interacts with?
- Are you familiar with Robert's Rules and meeting conventions?
- Can you build and manage a spreadsheet?
- Can you manage a simple website, write opinion pieces on your sport or activity, and edit and publish a newsletter?
- Can you deal effectively with local council, politicians, and businesses your club may need to interact with?
- Can you keep a basic set of financial accounts if required?
- Do you have at least 5 free hours per week to perform minimal basic committee duties, and up to 20 hours per week during busy periods or during the planning phase for special events like tournaments?

Every member of an effective committee managing a successful incorporated association should be capable of performing any of these tasks if required, particularly if their intention is to move their club forward rather than just maintain the status quo and warm a seat once per month at meetings.

Of course, if you're considering standing for president of your group, then it goes without saying that you have to be able to do any of the above at least well enough to be able to guide or mentor any committee member who may be struggling with any of these duties, or who may need some help to reach a level of effectiveness that makes them an asset to a committee. The president also needs to be a leader who sets the tone and direction of the committee, and whose style is both inclusive and effective in taking the club wherever it's members are keen to see it go. As president, you must also be able to communicate regularly and effectively, initiate policy, take on the duties of members who may resign at short notice, and promote your group in the local community.

The bottom line is that you shouldn't get yourself voted onto the committee of an incorporated club or association just for the T-shirt or the monthly seat at the table... You have to have the time, the enthusiasm, the commitment, and the ability to make an ongoing and positive contribution, and that takes certain skills and a sound understanding of what is required both legally and materially to be a really good committee member, regardless of whether we're talking about an amateur theatre group or a game fishing club.

