The Big Leap
Why State Task Forces Are So Difficult to Manage Well

In theory, there's nothing different about a task force in a city and one at the state level. Both have to go through the process we described in our paper on local task forces, From Pluibus to Unam. They have to make sure they have the right people on the task force, the issues must be researched and made clear, the critical decisions must be identified, the group should follow a logical process in building a case for change and deciding a course of action (we use what we call the DMP model of group decision-making), and they have to involve others, including elected officials, interest groups and citizens.

But in reality, state task forces are much more difficult to manage for five reasons:

1. The logistics of assembling task force members from all parts of the state are daunting.
2. Because the issues are statewide in scope, the research task is almost always more complicated.
3. Because of the logistical problems in calling meetings, the design of the meetings becomes critical.
4. The communications task – between the task force staff and its members, and between the task force and the numerous groups it must engage – is critical to success. Handle it poorly and the effort will fizzle.
5. And, let's face it, the stakes are higher and the interest groups more sophisticated and demanding when an important statewide issue is being decided.

Bottom line: It's a big leap in difficulty. That's why it's helpful to have experience help along the way.

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The Logistics of Statewide Groups

Let's start with the easy one. It's harder to call a meeting when people have to travel hours to get to it. As a result, you are limited in the number of sessions you can have. So how many can you hold? It depends on the task force's charge (what it's asked to do), the urgency of the decision and the task force's membership. (It's harder to get a group of corporate CEOs together than, say, a group of community relations managers and state agency directors.)

As a rule of thumb, we think most high-stakes, CEO-level task forces should plan on four work sessions, not including an orientation meeting. Some members may invest many more hours than that (especially the chair). And, depending on the work, there may be subgroups, which would meet separately. But our experience has been that, with good meeting design, research and communications, most important issues can be decided in four intense work sessions.

This should make it easier to get high-profile people on the task force. One thing leaders fear is making an open-ended volunteer commitment. If you can assure them that they will have to attend no more than four work sessions, plus an orientation session, most can find the time to participate.

The Critical Role of Research

The great thing about getting a high-profile task force together is that its members are experienced decision-makers in their own right. Give them high-quality background information, real alternatives, a good description of the tradeoffs in each choice and the likely paths to implementation, and they'll come back with solid – occasionally inspired – answers. But give them vague information, murky choices and little guidance about implementation, and three things will likely happen: You'll end up with a mishmash instead of clear decisions. You'll leave the members frustrated and angry. And you won't advance toward a good solution (which will displease whoever authorized the task force).

Research on statewide issues is usually more extensive than on local issues, simply because the issues are larger in scale. That multiplies the number of information sources and groups that must be consulted. But the aim is the same at the state and local levels: to make clear to the task force what's at stake and what's at issue, and present the information in ways that they can use in deciding what should be done.

Hint: The usual way of doing this, by compiling everything into a long, dry, academic-sounding report, is the worst way you can present information to decision makers. CEOs like information in focused briefing papers, delivered as needed in the process. (And keep in mind that many decision makers are better listeners and questioners than readers; so every meeting should open with a review of the task force's work to date, the decisions just ahead, and a quick review of what the staff has learned that relate to these decisions.)

Why Meeting Design Is Important

Research is an area where you probably need help from a skilled and experienced consultant. After all, not everyone is talented in identifying the information needed for good decisions or in presenting it. But meeting design is surely another.

A simple way of knowing the value of good meeting design is to do a quick investment calculation. Add up the number of hours task force members have to spend participating in the meeting and getting to and from them. Add in the hours of preparation (reading briefing papers, for instance). If they have worked in subgroups, add in those hours, too. Now multiply that by the average hourly pay of these people. (You'll have to guess at this.)

Here's a quick example: If you have a group of $500,000-a-year senior-level corporate managers on the task force, divide their salaries by 2,000 hours a year (40 hours a week times 50 weeks a year, not including a couple of vacation weeks). That gives you a "billable hour" rate of $250. Assume the meeting lasts four hours and it takes the average member two hours to get there and two hours to get home. That's eight hours. Add another couple of hours for reading the briefing papers and other communications between meetings, and you have a 10-hour commitment per meeting. (Let's assume there are no subgroups.) Multiply 10 hours by $250 an hour, and that's a single member's investment of $2,500. If you have 12 task force members, it means your task force members have *personally* invested $30,000 to participate in each meeting. Multiply by four work sessions and a two-hour orientation, that's nearly $140,000. At that level of investment, the meetings had better be logical, crisp and productive.

Don't Forget the Communications Strategy

Here's a good rule: If you don't have an effective communications strategy in mind, don't start the task force. Actually, you'll need two strategies, one for communicating with task force members, the other for communicating between the task force and interest groups and citizens. The first is obvious: You need a way of getting information to the members between meetings – in ways they'll feel comfortable with. (Remember: Be focused in your communications, don't throw information at them.) A web site, e-mail and an occasional mailing should do the trick.

The other strategy – between the task force and the interest groups and citizens – needs deeper thought. The task force is going to be watched intently by interest groups and more casually by citizens. There are many ways of sabotaging a task force but one of the most effective is to spread false rumors about its work. That's why you need to communicate intently with interest groups and make it easy for citizens to find what they want. One way is with a focused, well-designed, easily accessible web site, but that's only a start.

Even if your decisions are unpopular with some groups, it's better that they hear directly – and accurately – from you than receive a distorted version from others. Remember: In the absence of information, people will make up their own.

Why the Stakes Are Higher at the State Level

This seems obvious: The issues tend to be bigger and the problems knottier across an entire state than in a city or region. But that's not the reason that statewide task forces have to be better managed than their counterparts in cities. The real reason: The interest groups are more numerous and better organized at the state level.

Take the state of Florida. There are more than 2,400 lobbyists in Tallahassee, 15 for every single legislator. City halls, by contrast, are lobbying backwaters; most cities don't even require lobbyists to register. One that does is the city of Aventura, an affluent city of 25,000 in South Florida. Its entire lobbying core consists of 30 people, all but a few representing land developers, most of whom show up only once or twice a year.

The result: You may be able to take some shortcuts with city or county task force processes but almost certainly you won't at the state level. There are too many experienced and vigilant eyes watching.

The Road to Success

Given all this – the high-stakes nature of state task forces, and the need for high quality research, smart meeting design and proactive communications – it's little wonder task forces need outside help. But what kind? Too often, the state-sponsored ones borrow staff from the legislature or a state university or enlist a "loaned executive" from a corporation to run things.

There are two problems with this: First, these borrowed staffers sometimes aren't seen as neutral, and that can cause problems with the research or communications outreach. (Even state universities have interests at the capitol.) Second, the borrowed staffers usually aren't as practiced in task force management as an outside consultant. If they have talents (like doing research), they often aren't as strong in communications or meeting design. A mistake with any of these and the task force's entire effort could be wasted.

That's why the smartest move you could make is to hire a consulting firm that can do all phases of task force management. Here's another tip: Hire the firm as early as possible. That way, you can enlist the consultants in thinking not only about the task force's work flow but its composition. Bonus: When you approach high-level leaders to join the task force, it will help if you can describe in detail how the group will do its work.

Put it all together – effective research, smart meeting design, proactive communications and political sensitivity – and hiring an experienced, independent consultant is the best way of launching any important task force.

About Civic Strategies

Civic Strategies, Inc., is a collaborative and strategic planning firm that helps local governments and civic organizations make important decisions. Over the years, we've managed numerous task forces. To learn about Civic Strategies' services, call us at (404) 873-5343 or e-mail us at info@civic-strategies.com.

