



A LOST ART OF **ADVISORY COMMITTEES**

By Clyde Hornberger & John Foster



advisory committees are composed of experts in technical fields who are able to supplement the work of a given organization. Usually, the informal nature of these committees allows them to be a bit more flexible regarding the suggestions and strategies they provide. In the case of career and technical education (CTE), advisory committees provide a vital link to business and industry — a link that provides an essential communication mechanism. Successful school districts, career and technical schools, and colleges utilize a two-tiered business and industry advisory structure, with a school or institutional tier for strategic visioning and long-term planning (Foster, Foster, Hornberger, & McNally, 2015). This top or executive level tier is often referred to as a local advisory committee (LAC) or an executive council on CTE (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2018). Its membership is composed of business and community leaders, secondary and postsecondary education, government, organized labor, community, and economic and workforce development organizations. This group focuses on visioning and guiding the institution on issues such as legislation, funding and future CTE programming. The LAC typically meets twice each year or more frequently, depending on the CTE needs of the school and community.

The second tier is generally known as the occupational advisory committee (OAC). OACs have been a vital component of CTE since the early days of vocational education, and are mentioned in legislation (Foster, Hornberger, & Watkins, 2017). Business and industry advisory committees add value and relevance to individual CTE programs through advice from subject matter experts. The CTE teacher and their students receive support and a direct benefit from the advice of OAC members.

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Unfortunately, the implementation of advisory committees has become routine for many institutions and teachers and, as a result, the maximum benefit of the advisory committee may not be fully realized.

While the following story is fictional, it is representative of the types of inefficiencies we've encountered in our work with CTE programs across the country. See if you can spot potential issues as you read through our tale.

A new school year began & the committees prepared to meet.

The director of the Hometown Career & Technology Center (HCTC) announced the dates for the fall LAC and OAC meetings. The administrative team is busy preparing detailed progress reports on Perkins performance measures, state and HCTC goals, and performance indicators for the LAC breakfast meeting on Oct. 19. The information will be shared with teachers so they can address the school, program and student performance indicators with their OACs.

The LAC agenda is sent one month prior and the reports will be presented by the administrative team during the first part of the meeting. The fall OAC program meetings will begin with dinner on Oct. 29. Teachers and administrators prepare agendas for the OAC meetings, which include curriculum, instructional equipment and facility needs, student placement, and end-of-program assessment data. Of course, both the LAC and OAC agendas include attendance, approval of the minutes from the previous meeting, and any "old business and new business," as would be common with a public agenda using tax dollars.

In preparation for the OAC meetings, CTE teachers send a reminder to the committee members and a call is placed to new members to make sure they are planning to attend. They are also made aware

that dinner will be held in the cafeteria and the HCTC director will address the combined OAC membership, informing them about HCTC progress, goals and student achievement.

The October LAC breakfast meeting went very well, but attendance was lower than expected. The administrative team did an excellent job providing detailed reports and updates. The LAC members in attendance were pleased with the school goals and achievements reflected in the performance reports.

The OAC meeting hosted more than 100 OAC members for dinner and the director's remarks and update. Dinner started on time at 6:00 p.m. and remarks ended at 7:20 p.m. After a short break, the OAC members moved to their individual CTE program classrooms/labs to conduct their meetings. The individual program meetings began with introductions, and attendance was accurately recorded. Teachers responded to questions about the director's update and then provided an update on their individual programs. Teachers also discussed their needs regarding curriculum and instructional equipment and facility concerns, followed by a recap of the program accreditation, industry certifications, student placement and achievement.

The OAC members emphasized their need for additional skilled graduates. The opportunities to involve students in cooperative education placements were also discussed. The program equipment was reviewed and recommendations were provided. The CTE teachers recorded the minutes of the meeting and thanked everyone for attending. A reminder of the date for the spring meeting was provided.

Progress and Challenges

The HCTC director reviewed the minutes of the LAC and OAC meetings. He

was disappointed in the attendance of the LAC and noted that, even though the school had added three new CTE programs over the past five years, overall attendance was less than it had been 10 years ago. The director decided to conduct an anonymous survey seeking feedback from current and previous LAC and OAC members. Though the state requires that CTE directors survey advisory committee members concerning the committees' effectiveness, the school had not surveyed members during his tenure; he believed the 13-question, state-provided survey required too much time for busy members to complete.

He prepared a brief survey and sent it to members with a short explanation of the purpose, asking them to provide feedback on the meeting's effectiveness and requesting suggestions regarding how to improve the meeting and maximize the time and expertise of the members. He asked the following five questions, and provided an additional opportunity for comments or suggestions:

- Is the role of the committee clearly defined?
- Do meeting agendas reflect the purpose of the committee and role of its members?
- Are committee recommendations considered and a response provided in a timely manner?
- Is your time and expertise valued by the committee and institution?
- How do you rate the effectiveness of the committee?

When the responses were returned, the director was surprised but pleased by the honesty of the feedback. He was surprised that LAC members were very critical of the LAC meetings. The members indicated the reports should be mailed in

advance and administrators should only respond to questions from the committee about the reports. The members indicated their time and expertise were not fully valued due to the content and length of the meeting. Though the meeting was chaired by a business leader, feedback indicated that LAC members felt the administration dominated the meeting. In summary, the suggestions for improvement included “Send reports in advance.” and “Talk less; listen more.” The business and community leaders value the school and its role in education and workforce development, but they care less about the detailed mandatory reports that were discussed.

Results from the OAC member surveys had a similar theme. The members believed the information provided in the general session during dinner should have been mailed in advance with less time spent on those reports. The individual OAC meetings garnered similar feedback: too much detail about reports and not enough time for members to provide input on programs and industry trends and needs.

The members indicated that, while the teacher is their primary supplier of new employees and the students and graduates are an asset to their company, the meetings should not be dominated by the school or teacher. The meetings should be about advice, and not reports. Additionally, business and industry members expressed a concern over the number of

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salespersons and vendors in attendance. They felt their presence created a direct conflict and placed undue influence on equipment procurement decisions. Finally, the OAC members expressed their concern for unresolved issues that are the same every year, and the members would like an HCTC administrator present during the meetings to respond to questions. Holding a large dinner meeting on one evening for 25 or more CTE program OACs makes it difficult for school administrators to attend every OAC meeting.

What are your thoughts?

The fictional scenario presented highlights great opportunities for learning. Certainly, there are key practices that can be improved. CTE educational entities have been conducting advisory committee meetings for over 50 years and they can become routine if not given the priority or attention to detail they deserve. Remember that these committees are a school’s primary connection to business and industry, and they provide a great opportunity for engagement and support! Fortunately, the advisory committees can easily be improved, with a few simple adjustments that can be accomplished at little or no cost.

NOCTI and ACTE have publications available that provide detailed information on OACs. From Chapter 9 in *Your First Year in CTE: 10 More Things to Know* (2015), and Chapter 4 in the first book in the administrator series, *CTE Administrative Leadership: 10 Things to Know in Your First Year* (2017), the authors provide helpful tips on establishing high-quality OACs and ways to ensure they are effective throughout the school year. It is critical to define effective best practices before establishing and conducting advisory committee meetings. We’ve assembled a few important attributes below.

Committee Membership

Organizing an OAC begins with identifying its membership. Every CTE program should have an OAC composed of subject matter experts that are currently employed in the occupation. While it is not uncommon for teachers to ask fellow teachers to serve on an OAC, this practice adds educators and not business and industry members to the committee. Teachers from other schools frequently talk about their school issues, which can cause confusion among your OAC members and generally detract from the specific agenda. Vendors and/or salespersons may be concerned about the CTE program, but it is a clear conflict of interest having them present and/or recommending equipment they sell. The practice should be forbidden by school policy. That’s not to say that OAC members shouldn’t be involved with vendor presentations, as inviting competing vendors to demonstrate their products to OAC members is different than vendors actually serving on a com-

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mittee. This common practice should be a red flag for teachers and administrators who need to be aware of the potential for a conflict of interest, particularly if equipment is purchased from a vendor serving as an OAC member.

There are instances individuals not currently employed in the occupation, such as parents, students, counselors, and/or community members participate in OAC activities. It is important that these individuals be considered as supplemental and non-voting members. The role of non-voting members should be defined in the OAC policies and procedures. It should be noted that non-voting members should not be included in the count when confirming a sufficient quorum is present for a meeting. If there is not a quorum of subject matter experts from business and industry present (less than five or six subject matter experts per program area) the meeting should be rescheduled.

The Teacher's Role

The CTE teacher's role is to coordinate the meeting logistics, serve as a resource, and to provide the educator's perspective on OAC concerns and recommendations. Teachers should not serve as officers on the OAC. The CTE teacher should make educational decisions on how content and skills are taught, but the curriculum, or what is taught, and the instructional equipment recommendations must come from the subject matter experts on the OAC.

The Purpose of the OAC

It may appear confusing to some teachers and OAC members, but it must be understood that the OAC is "advisory" and not a governing body. It is essential that everyone involved with OAC activities is clear on their role. When an OAC is properly organized with rules and guidelines defining the duties and responsibilities of

the OAC and its membership, there should be no conflict or confusion. Both CTE teachers and OAC members should have written rules and guidelines regarding the conduct of the OAC meeting and the value of its recommendations.

Engaging OAC Members

Assuring OAC members are actively involved in school improvement discussions, tracking student achievement, and acknowledging student awards and recognition are also key engagement strategies. This engagement provides benefits for OAC members, teachers, students, and administrators as it strengthens the tie between OAC members and the program. Other strategies for engagement include instruction on the use of data, particularly third-party-generated competency data (from credentialing bodies). OAC review of data and the subsequent discussions can identify the need for shifts in instruction, curriculum updates, or additional work stations or equipment. Engaging OAC members in performance testing, especially those that take place at a member's facility, also increases buy-in to the teaching process and provides a unique perspective on individual student competence.

Other successful OAC and employer engagement strategies include scheduling at least one meeting each year at an OAC member's place of business, or having the CTE teacher and an OAC member(s) attend a trade or labor organization meeting. These meetings may provide a great opportunity to add CTE-related topics to their agenda or to speak about the school and his or her program.

CTE educators most often enjoy a special relationship with business and industry, but that is only achieved by developing and nurturing employer engagement. It happens because there is a mutual inter-

est among CTE educators and business leaders that is based on creating a highly skilled workforce. There is no better way to engage your local business committee than to develop strong, committed, innovative OACs. The time and energy it takes to achieve a successful OAC program is well worth the effort. ■

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