10 Dysfunctional Steering Groups, and How to Avoid Them

Whilst many Steering Groups are effective, if you’ve ever been involved in big change programmes we’ll bet you have a tale to tell of where at least one of them went wrong because of poor steering. Stories of transformations that have suffered through poor governance are common. Millions of pounds are wasted and too many change programmes fail due to poor steering and weak leadership. That’s a fact, but it doesn’t have to be.

Steering Groups are a key component in driving successful and sustainable business change, keeping it under control and delivering the outcome. Poorly executed Steering Groups can quickly allow control to be lost, often catastrophically so. We asked a selection of our clients and colleagues for their experiences. Here are edited highlights of some of the dysfunctional tales of horror they came up with, and a few pointers on how to avoid the same happening to you. Do any of these scenarios sound familiar?

1. What’s the price of fish?

This scenario is usually aided and abetted by an erratic sponsor. Someone asks a question which is completely outside the scope of the meeting and is certainly not covered by the briefing papers.

The meeting is then allowed to degenerate into a discussion on topics such as the price of fish, or why no one knows the price of fish.

To avoid  ▶  Have a strong chairperson who stops the Steering Group wasting time on irrelevant discussions, and reminds everyone on why they are there and how they all need to focus.

2. Getting bogged down in the detail

It’s not normally the role of the Steering Group to work through, in detail, thorny business problems. It’s their role to make the decisions that help more qualified and better informed people to do this.

Due to a lack of understanding of their remit and exacerbated by poor leadership, these ‘in the weeds’ discussions need to be stopped quickly.

To avoid  ▶  This needs a clear view of why issues are being raised and a solid Chairperson who knows when discussion should be stopped and left to the right specialists outside the meeting.

3. The great global gathering

Monolithic Steering Groups are common in big organisations. The thinking goes: “Our programme covers multiple divisions and functions so we need each to be represented, probably by phone, or better still, by video conference.”

It almost certainly takes place at a strange time of the day or night and with two time zones that never get the briefing papers!

To avoid  ▶  While there will certainly be decisions that require cross-divisional input these are usually better achieved by the local project managers working together and a sponsor who will actively work to support them.

Try not to confuse driving the programme forward with communications and stakeholder updates.

“The meeting was scheduled to discuss project risks and issues. 120 people were invited to participate in the discussion. They had to book a conference centre! 110 people said nothing. Nothing got decided.”

4. All the cool people are there!

This is similar to ‘The great global gathering’, but these are the Steering Groups that every man and his dog wants to join because they are the place to be seen!

They steer the ‘hot programmes’ or the ‘big strategic programmes’.

Almost impossible to schedule due to the number of diaries to be coordinated, the sheer weight of numbers make discussions unruly and unproductive.

To avoid  ▶  Make sure you understand the roles required to make decisions and ensure that these and only these are represented in the room. If others need to be kept in the loop deal with that separately.
5. The spoilt child

Steering Groups that get derailed by the bad behaviour of individuals are more common that people outside the business world might believe.

Actively disruptive and often maliciously so, such people can stun meetings into shocked, open-mouthed silence as progress is halted and everyone watches a toddler in full-blown foot-stamping mood.

To avoid ➤ Having clear behavioural guidelines is the best way to head off spoilt child tactics. Firm but fair chairing that keeps any budding Violet Elizabeth Botts in their place will be welcomed by everyone in the room.

“...political, game-playing stakeholder would occasionally dial in to conference calls but would never announce himself. He would stay quiet until he interrupted to throw in a bombshell, close to the end of the call and then hang up.”

6. Disengaged attendees

People who are in the room, but their heads are elsewhere are no use to anyone.

“During a critical Steering Group meeting, the Sponsor spent the entire meeting signing Christmas cards.”

To avoid ➤ Making sure everyone is clear on the meeting etiquette will make it easier to pull disengaged attendees back into line. If they’re genuinely disinterested and have nothing to offer, then they shouldn’t be in the room. Replace slackers with people who are committed to driving the programme forward.

7. But the mission depends on me!

If your Steering Group is manned with operational people it’s easy for concentration in the room to slip when people’s heads are focused on operational issues.

“...phones all started pinging and it was news that a deal they’d been working on for over a year had just been confirmed. Had to just give up on that meeting. They were too distracted to make any progress. All later meetings were ‘phone free.’”

To avoid ➤ Agree ground rules for the meetings, and enforce them. The message is clear. You’re in here to do something, so deal with everything else later.

If there are urgent things that must be dealt with, take a 5-minute break and when everyone returns, get back to the job in hand.

8. Let him have it!

This is a particularly unpleasant genre of Steering Group that may be all too familiar, especially in failing programmes. These develop purely for business leaders to vent their frustration on the Programme Manager.

To avoid ➤ Turn the tables on these situations quickly, and move the focus away from reporting and to remediation. Make clear what is being asked of individuals in the room and the collective support required. Make the problem and the solution a group challenge.

“The Sponsor treated the meeting as her monthly slot for the Programme Manager to update her and her team. She habitually complained of a lack of leadership on the programme, and when challenged how much time she spent with the Programme Manager prepping for steering, she says she has no time”

9. Glass half empty

There is usually someone on any Steering Group that has a real problem with any suggestion being made to resolve an issue, always looking at the downside to any change and on the negative side of making progress. A close friend of ‘Mrs. No’ is ‘Mr. I need more detail’. He also has an equal ability to chill the room.

To avoid ➤ Neutralise progress blockers by pre-positioning. Accept that some attendees will need a lot more convincing, and will want to examine evidence around decisions more closely than others. Get to them before the meeting and in the meeting - come prepared.

10. Yes sir, no sir

Very hierarchical organisations typically run into the same Steering Group rut. If the most senior leader comments on something, all of the lower ranking staff agree and nod (or at least don’t disagree). When the lines of command are drawn so strongly that people don’t feel free to communicate and challenge openly, meetings can never be truly effective.

To avoid ➤ Pre-meetings are essential to agree strategies on how to get key issues to the surface and the right decisions made. Everyone in the group needs the confidence to speak freely and theonus is on the senior leaders to underline that keeping quiet when you have important information that affects the decisions being made is not on!