



Getting Participation in IT Decisions— How and Why

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Why Do You Need Participation? (And You Do)

Information technology organizations face almost unlimited demand at a time of cost pressures and labor shortages. IT decisions tap into the most basic tensions within the university—they cut across schools and are both strategic and expensive. Unless the university community actively participates in decisions about funding levels and priorities, IT groups will be blamed for failing to meet unlimited expectations. Broad participation helps faculty, administrators and IT service providers develop a shared view of the issues and the alternatives. It builds the trust necessary for responsible expectations from customers and accountability from providers.

Getting participation, however, is easier said than done. This paper offers concrete strategies in regard to two tough problems:

- How to revitalize a plodding or unwieldy advisory structure.
- How to get fast and focused input when you cannot wait for the advisory structure or when you need to involve the broader community (“Participation Lite”).

How to Revitalize an Advisory Structure

Advisory structures are the formal and traditional way to involve the community in IT decisions. How can you revitalize a plodding or unwieldy structure? You need a sturdy infrastructure for the long haul but you want it also to be *flexible*—like a tree that bends in high wind but does not break.

In the chart below, we explore three alternative structures for participation. Later we talk about how it “feels” inside each one and suggest points of leverage for improving each kind of structure.

Use the chart to locate the kind of participation structure your institution has (it might be a blend). Understand the strengths as well as the weaknesses of your current structure and think about how to play to its strengths. Look closely at the tradeoffs—substituting another structure for the one you have means taking on its weaknesses as well as its strengths.

	Governance (a.k.a., Drawing on Authority)	Advisory Board (a.k.a., Wise Heads)	Initiative-based Task Force (a.k.a., Harnessing Energy)
What group does	Vote	Advise	Make it happen
How people are chosen	Representation	Expertise or patriotism	Concern about an issue
When people leave	Change in job	Fade away	With handoff
How funding works	Decision commits the funds	Not my problem	Shared—If you benefit, you pay
IT vision or strategy	Depend on CIO	Everyone has an opinion	Sum of a lot of initiatives

	Governance (a.k.a., Drawing on Authority)	Advisory Board (a.k.a., Wise Heads)	Initiative-based Task Force (a.k.a., Harnessing Energy)
Hardest kind of problem	One that requires the university hat—or deciding in a hurry	Infrastructure or other big-ticket issues	Integration over time or organizational units
Key strength	When we decide, it means something	Free to think about the big picture	Tight link to implementation

Advisory Structures—How They Feel

Now try putting yourself inside each type of advisory structure to see how it “feels.” Use the following chart to understand each participation structure and think about the ways impersonal systems get “personalized” in our perception of others and in their perception of us.

	Governance (a.k.a., Drawing on Authority)	Advisory Board (a.k.a., Wise Heads)	Initiative-based Task Force (a.k.a., Harnessing Energy)
Members’ allegiance	Parochial (by school)	No true stake	Parochial (by issue)
Relationship to IT	Chain of command	We “think,” you “do”	Develop a common view of the problem
How IT units see group	Politics prevail	Cannot get them to do real work	They forget I have a day job
Caricature	Smoke-filled room	All hat, no cattle	Commando unit
Peacock display	My school is richer than yours	I know more than you do	My issue is bigger than yours

Advisory Structures—Leverage Points to Make Them Better

In any system, there are leverage points where intervention yields the most bang for the buck. The interventions described below can make your advisory structure more effective.

Leverage Point	Governance (a.k.a., Drawing on Authority)	Advisory Board (a.k.a., Wise Heads)	Initiative-based Task Force (a.k.a., Harnessing Energy)
Who plays	Limit terms. Set criteria for membership. Shrink group by including types (small schools representative vs. member from each small school).	Shrink group and draw on other ways to get input (see “Participation Lite”). Create incentives and endpoints to keep members interested.	Shrink group and draw on other ways to get input.
Kinds of issues	Not usually a problem in this structure—“big issues” tend to end up here.	Meatier, more urgent issues. More strategic (if group has drifted to the mundane), closer to the ground (if group has drifted to blue sky debate).	Not usually a problem in this structure— people feel they are trying to solve real problems.
When issues show up	When issue surfaces, with checkpoints long before formal recommendation is required. (Problems you are trying to solve: rubber stamp)	When issue surfaces, with later checkpoints. Create scanning mechanism for emerging issues. (Problems you are trying to solve: pie in the sky, rubber stamp)	Scan for changes in the broader system. (Problems you are trying to solve: no coherence across issues)
Link to authority	Not a problem in this kind of structure.	Clear charge from the start, with pre-commitment to check-in points.	Periodic meetings with executive sponsors.
Meeting structure	Reserve some meetings for “strategy” distinct from operational meetings. Spin off workgroups with mix of members from outside and from full group.	Spin off workgroups	Spin off workgroups. More time in full group at beginning and end. More time in workgroups in the middle.
Meeting rhythm	Frequency of meetings is legislated so vary pace of issues. Longer-term issues can be monitored at every meeting and discussed in detail at checkpoints.	Calendar a monthly meeting of full group to shelter the time. As issues demand, subgroups might use that slot. Set deadlines to create urgency and help people shed secondary problems to focus on most critical issues.	Project tells you how often to meet. When issues need “big picture” review, full group comes together. Otherwise, workgroups carry the load. Calendar a long session of the full group within the first two months and when the end is in sight.
Handoff	Ease implementation by involving providers in the decisions.	Road shows to test preliminary recommendations with stakeholders.	Try to avoid surprises. Test issues periodically with stakeholders.

“Participation Lite”—How to Get Fast and Focused Input

Sometimes you need tightly focused participation in a hurry. “Participation lite” is useful in situations like these:

- A lot of people care about a decision you have to make and you really want their perspectives. But you have to move quickly. What do you do?
- Your task force needs the wisdom and clout of a very busy person. Asking her to come to every meeting just will not work. What do you do?
- Not everybody is going to be able to get his or her way. You want to give people a chance to hear each other’s perspectives on an important issue. What do you do?

The strategies in the chart below, which we call “participation lite,” complement the long-haul participation that you get from more formal advisory structures.

	With Whom	When
Focus groups	Segments of community	Early listening
Town meetings	Entire community	Sharing reasons and recommendations
Website	Entire community and beyond	Throughout the process
Invite to a meeting	Selected stakeholders or experts	Determined by issues
Interviews	Wise heads, 600-pound gorillas, influencers	Early to gather information, later to test
Take it on the road	Existing groups	Early recommendations or alternative solutions
Broadcast e-mail	Existing groups	Seek simple information or test simple ideas

Each variety of “participation lite” has pros and cons, outlined below. Consider tradeoffs before you decide how to budget your communication energy.

	Pros	Cons
Focus groups	In-depth understanding of points of view	Time consuming, need skilled facilitator
Town meetings	Opportunity to persuade	Disparate interests in audience
Website	Symbol of openness, easy to give information	Out of date is worse than not at all
Invite to a meeting	Hook in “hard to gets”	Must keep providing context
Interviews	Honor expertise and authority—and learn	Time consuming, needs to be synthesized
Take it on the road	Piggyback on existing forums	One of many on agenda—not enough attention
Broadcast e-mail	Quick and easy— piggyback on existing forums	No one feels obligated to respond

This material was developed for clients and associates to whom this information might be of interest. For more information, please contact CFAR at info@cfar.com or 215-320-3200, or visit our website at <http://www.cfar.com>.