The Personnel Committee by Susan Beaumont (An Alban Institute Resource)

Q: What is the purpose of a personnel committee, and what is it supposed to do?
A: The personnel committee has the potential to be one of the most helpful or most dysfunctional committees at work in the life of the congregation. The personnel committee serves the governing board of the church in an advisory capacity on issues related to personnel administration. It does not exist to manage the interface between staff and congregation (that is the work of the board) and it does not exist to provide managerial or leadership oversight to the staff team (that is the work of the senior pastor).

Responsibilities to Embrace
An effective personnel committee recommends policy on human resource (HR) management to the governing board. The board adopts or amends the recommended policies as it sees fit. A personnel committee should recommend policies and expectations related to: the creation of job descriptions, performance feedback practices (including the annual performance review), salary administration practices, benefits, professional development, leave and sabbatical taking, equal employment opportunity, professional misconduct, conflicts of interest, record keeping and any other miscellaneous employment policies needed to comply with applicable state employment law.

Once policy has been adopted, it is the role of the personnel committee to satisfy the board that the church is in compliance with established policies. This is where many personnel committees get themselves in trouble, by over-investing in the governance responsibilities of the board or the managerial responsibilities of the head of staff. The specific level of involvement to insure policy compliance will vary depending upon the size of the congregation. When the staff team is large enough to include an HR Director, the personnel committee limits its oversight role to a cursory review of job descriptions, performance evaluation forms and salary recommendations, in a manner that insures compliance with stated policies and outcomes.

In smaller congregations the personnel committee may be invited, by the senior pastor, to more actively assist in the performance management process by: helping to write job descriptions, conducting salary surveys with outside organizations, advising on difficult personnel matters, and sitting in on disciplinary conversations with employees. It’s critical to bear in mind that a committee who has been invited to engage in these HR activities does so at the discretion and invitation of the senior pastor or head of staff. The committee should never presume to initiate these activities of their own accord, as doing so would threaten to undermine the senior pastor’s authority as head of staff.

In some traditions, the personnel committee may also be asked to participate in the annual performance review of the senior pastor. It’s important for the governing board to maintain overall responsibility for the performance evaluation of the head of staff, and the alignment of head of staff’s goals with congregational goals. The personnel committee may serve as a conduit in orchestrating the data gathering or in hosting the conversation but should never take on overall responsibility for the evaluation itself.
**Pitfalls to Avoid:**
Neither the board nor the personnel committee should ever be responsible for the performance evaluation or goal setting of employees below the senior pastor level. The governing board is responsible for the performance evaluation and goal setting of the senior pastor. The senior pastor is responsible for the performance evaluation and goal setting of his or her direct reports, and all other supervisors are responsible for the performance evaluation and goal setting of their direct reports.

Personnel committees who imagine that they exist to advocate for the best interests of the staff, or protect the best interests of the congregation, often find themselves embroiled in hotbeds of triangulation (gossip). Personnel committees should only make themselves available to receive reports of potential employment policy violations. Any complaints about staff team performance need to be lodged directly with the employee in question or their direct supervisor. People who want to complain about the leadership of the senior pastor should be redirected back to the senior pastor to express their complaint. The only exception to this rule is a complaint that involves a potential professional misconduct issue. An established process for reviewing the ministry of the senior pastor will eliminate the need for congregants to use the personnel committee as a random complaint board.

Personnel committees should avoid the practice of meeting one on one with employees just to check in and see how things are going. These practices tend to undermine supervisory relationships on the staff team, by inviting employees to vent their displeasure with their supervisor. Most of the input received in such meetings is not appropriate fodder for the personnel committee but must be resolved through the supervisory relationship.

Susan Beaumont is an Alban Senior Consultant specializing in the unique dynamics of large congregations and the staff team dynamics of middle judicatories. She is also the co-author of When Moses Meets Aaron: Staffing and Supervision in Large Congregations (Alban Institute, 2007).

Congregations, 2010-07-01
Summer 2010, Number 3