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HOUSE COMMITTEE ORGANIZATION
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IMPROVING SOME SKILLS OF COMMITTEE STAFF

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(II)

IMPROVING SOME SKILLS OF COMMITTEE STAFF

(By Walter Kravitz, Congressional Research Service)

This paper suggests a few ways in which the House of Representatives might assist new committee staff to acquire some of the skills of their craft more quickly and systematically than at present. More experienced committee staff may also benefit from some of these approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Several premises, based on personal observation rather than on systematic data, underlie these suggestions.

The first is that Congress implicitly expects its professional committee staff to perform functions requiring a wide variety of specialized skills and knowledge.

The second is that for the most part committee staff are evidently expected to acquire the skills and knowledge they ought to have through on-the-job training; Congress as an institution provides few other means.

Third, in some committee environments on-the-job experience for new staff is, by itself, a slow, haphazard and sometimes incomplete learning method.

Fourth, a modest, relatively inexpensive, but coordinated and systematic training program may help equip new committee staff with useful skills and knowledge much more quickly and comprehensively than the present approach permits.

Finally, some portions of such a program may even be helpful to more experienced committee staff and to Members' personal staff as well.

These propositions are not intended to imply any denigration of the overall caliber of present staff. On the contrary, congressional committees currently enjoy the services of many skillful and knowledgeable persons. Nor should these statements be interpreted as an assault on the value of long and practical working experience. Given the complexities of legislative and committee processes, no training program could provide an adequate substitute for on-the-job experience; and no training program will produce instantly skilled staff.

It is also true, of course, that many new staff work under, or in close association with, more experienced colleagues, and learn much from them. How thorough an education new staff receive in this fashion, however, evidently varies according to the ability, availability, and willingness of senior personnel to teach their juniors.

Moreover, there have been cases, although admittedly rare, in which committees have replaced virtually their entire professional staffs with new and largely inexperienced personnel at the beginning of a Congress. More frequent are the instances of new subcommittee staff who find themselves installed in offices physically isolated from the

experienced people of the full committee or of other subcommittees, and who must operate under circumstances that make it difficult for them to establish working and learning relationships with those staff. Thrust into situations of this kind, new staff sometimes feel that they are, in effect, reinventing the wheel.

All of these and other types of repetitive situations suggest that a carefully planned and coordinated supplementary training program might accelerate the process of converting new, and often bewildered, committee staff into knowledgable and useful adjuncts of the committee system.

PERTINENT STAFF FUNCTIONS, SKILLS, AND KNOWLEDGE

Among the numerous functions that most committees expect their professional staffs to perform, at least two basic ones require skills and knowledge amenable to supplementary training programs of one kind or another. The first encompasses the broad area of assisting committees in considering public policy issues and programs and in making decisions on legislative proposals. A second has to do with the technical and managerial aspects of committee operations and of the legislative process generally.

To assist committees in their policy-examination and decision-making functions, professional staff ought to have a thorough knowledge of: (a) the basic elements and details of the subject fields within their committee's jurisdiction, and the latest developments in those fields; (b) the nature, history, and current operations of programs in those fields; (c) the availability of printed sources of information; (d) how best to utilize available institutional sources of information, research and analytical assistance, such as the General Accounting Office, the Congressional Research Service, the soon to be available Office of Technology Assessment, and other public and private organizations; and (e) how to prepare and present pertinent informational and analytical materials to committee members in formats appropriate to members' needs and at the specific times members need them.

In performing the technical and managerial support functions involved in committee operations and the legislative process generally, professional staff require a working grasp of: (a) the rules, precedents, and strategies of committee, floor, and conference procedure; (b) the problems and techniques of translating policy decisions into legislative language; (c) the structure and purposes of committee reports; and (d) the organization, management, and administration of committee hearings.

Stated so abstractly, all of this only partially conveys the reality of what a competent and knowledgable committee staff person ought to know and be able to do well. Take for example the proper utilization of institutional resources of information, research, and analysis. He must acquire an intimate understanding of what such resources are, and are inherently not, capable of producing, which individuals in those institutions are reliable for his purposes and which are not, what biases may exist in them, what kinds of products they can best produce, and what time constraints he must allow for in using them. He ought to familiarize himself with the full range of services each organization

can produce, and exercise judgment in selecting the organization and the service that best fits his particular needs. He ought to know how much support he can demand from an institution without alienating it. He ought to learn the most effective methods of orchestrating all available institutional resources in ways that will harmonize and focus their individual strengths upon the needs of the committee he serves.

Consider another example. Like Members of Congress, a significant majority of committee staff are lawyers. One might expect that trained lawyers would have some realistic conception of what is involved in bill drafting—more specifically, in the problems and techniques of transforming policy decisions into effective legislative language. In fact, young lawyers among new committee staff rarely appear to have such knowledge or to appreciate the problems involved. In new committee staff who are lawyers have difficulty in this area, what problems must face the non-lawyers?

Finally, consider the situation of new committee staff attempting to learn the intricacies of committee, floor and conference procedures. Available printed sources of information and explanation are few and not very adequate. Apparently few law schools or political science departments teach the subject at all, and few of those that do teach it in any but the most superficial detail. Most new committee staff are in the same position as new Members of Congress; they must pick up bits and pieces as they go along. Unlike new Members, however, new committee staff rarely have the opportunity to absorb the intricacies of floor procedure by spending an hour or so each day on the floor of the House.

In passing, it might be worthwhile to note that there are some committee staff with several years experience on the job who are still not entirely clear about all the rules of the House that apply to committee procedures, much less about such arcane floor matters as pro forma amendments, the germaneness rule, and the hour rule.

SOME ELEMENTS OF A TRAINING PROGRAM

The range of possible elements in a comprehensive training and orientation program for committee staff is potentially vast. Most of the possibilities suggested below, however, are based on the assumption that Congress would prefer a modest and relatively inexpensive investment, for the most part utilizing already existing expertise in the legislative branch.

1. *Subject expertise.*—The Congressional Research Service now sponsors monthly seminars on major public policy issues for Members of Congress. Occasionally the Service holds similar seminars for staff. Congress might direct CRS to expand these activities into a full range of seminars and round table discussion for committee staff, perhaps with cooperation of the General Accounting Office and, when it is fully operational, the Office of Technology Assessment.

Section 304 of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 allows standing committees to authorize special training or schooling for its professional staff members, whenever the committee determines that such training or schooling will be of future assistance to the committee. My impression is that House committees have made very little use of this authority. To encourage and facilitate greater utilization of

that authority, the House might consider entering into agreements with appropriate educational institutions in the Washington-Baltimore area.

Section 303 of the 1970 Act permits committees to hire temporary consultants. The House might encourage more widespread use of this authority to bring consultants to Washington for the purpose of briefing committee staff on a regular basis. GAO, CRS, and other legislative and private institutions could be the vehicles for identifying and locating suitable consultants.

2. *Program operations.*—For several years, the General Accounting Office has presented briefings on its most recent investigations of program operations to a few committees at the beginning of each session. GAO might be directed to extend this service to all committees.

At least one department in the executive branch has developed a congressional internship program for its career employees. House committees might consider the possibility of arranging exchange internship programs, of a short duration, for its staff.

3. *Utilization of research and bill drafting institutions.*—New committee staff could be required to attend intensive but detailed briefing sessions to be developed by GAO, CRS, the Office of Technology Assessment, and the Office of the Legislative Counsel, each on its own functions, resources, activities, and services.

4. *Rules and procedures.*—New committee staff might be required to attend intensive courses on committee, floor, and conference procedures. These could be developed and taught by staff of the Parliamentarian of the House, CRS, or both. A guest lecture on Senate procedure by the Senate's Parliamentarian or one of his assistants would also be useful.

The same agencies could be directed to prepare and have published basic, easy-to-use reference manuals on procedure.

5. *Report writing.*—The House might identify an experienced committee staff man to develop and teach a brief course in the techniques of preparing committee reports. Alternatively, a manual for report preparation might be prepared.

6. *Hearings management.*—It might be useful to explore the possibility of a project to gather and evaluate the accumulated knowledge in the House of hearings organization, management, administration, and techniques, the results to be published as a manual for committee staff.

Finally, the House is unlikely to extract the fullest value from any comprehensive training program for committee staff unless it delegates responsibility for developing, administering, and coordinating it to some appropriate single instrumentality. Several candidates for the task already exist, among them the Committee on House Administration, the Clerk of the House, and the Joint Committee on Congressional Operations. Whichever agency receives the assignment, it might do well to explore what assistance might be provided by such organizations as the American Political Science Association, which already sponsors a congressional internship program and co-sponsors the biennial freshman Member seminars.

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