How to be a President or Chair

Being part of a committee can be challenging. It takes time, commitment, dedication, and above all a belief in what you’re doing – especially as you are the President or Chair!

So, congratulations on being elected! This is a role of great responsibility and trust, but you need to make sure you enjoy your time in office.

- The key to this position is having a **vision** of what you want your committee to achieve – and be able to communicate it to others. You are the leader, and the person to whom everyone will turn for advice and guidance.

- You will find that committee members expect you to know EVERYTHING. It’s impossible for you to know every aspect of running your group, but you should know where to find the answer – whether that’s on the Zone Online (e.g. for funding or publicity), knowing upcoming training dates, or simply asking at the Activities Zone Desk.

- You are both the figurehead and the key contact point for the Society or Committee. It is your responsibility to ensure that any communication from the Activities Zone staff or Activities Officer are responded to and dealt with quickly.

This guide covers:

1. Six key responsibilities of a President/Chair.
2. The leadership skills you will develop during your time in post.
3. What to do if you encounter problems.

Let’s start with the six key responsibilities:

1. Managing Change
2. Delegating Tasks
3. Taking Responsibility
4. Motivating the Committee
5. Communicating
6. Calling and Chairing Meetings

1. Managing Change
- As a new and enthusiastic President or Chair, you will probably want to bring in some changes: some small and others which may be fairly fundamental. It is worth bearing in mind that people often find change very stressful and the emotions that the word ‘change’ can bring need to be managed carefully and with consideration. People’s emotions are real to them and you will need to take your team with you, at a pace that is manageable, rather than force them to follow.

- When considering making changes to direction or activities, it is worth asking at the Activities Zone Desk to look at two key documents: your Constitution and your new society application form.
These will tell you what your group originally proposed to do when it was set up. Any changes to your constitution need to be approved by the Activities Officer (see the ‘How to run an Election’ guide on the Zone Online).

- As Societies and Committees are run democratically, you should put any proposed changes to the vote. That way, you will have the backing of the majority of your committee and change will then be easier to manage. As the leader, the person who drives the vision, you will need to persevere and continually motivate the committee when things aren’t quite working to plan.

- Many President/Chairs find it helpful to use the ‘Strategic Planning tool’ in order to create strategy for the upcoming year; a template is available on the Zone Online.

2. Delegating Tasks

- President and Chairs often feedback that delegation is the aspect of leadership that most concerns them. Many President/Chairs (unfortunately) try to do everything themselves or want to control all matters. This has the dual effect of leaving you exhausted – but also leaving the rest of the committee aimless and frustrated.

- While it is the job of the President/Chair to liaise with the Secretary and the Treasurer regarding the overall running of the committee, you are not required to know, for example, how the Students’ Union finance system works, or how to keep membership records. These finer details are embedded within your committee members’ roles, but you should ensure that the committee know what they are doing. Encourage them to contact the Zone for help if they need it or visit: www.sheffieldsu.com/zoneonline.

- It is important when delegating a task to somebody to explain to them why they have been chosen. Ideally, they should have the skills and enthusiasm for the task. If they don’t, they could work with someone else who is better skilled; or undertake some training.

- Setting a good example is crucial. President/Chairs need to ensure they complete their own tasks on time and be prepared to apologise if not. You also need to thank everyone for their contribution, no matter how small.

3. Taking Responsibility

- Those running a society or committee have a ‘duty of care’ in law to ensure the safety of its members and any other people who may be affected by its activities and events. Anyone who creates ‘hazards’ needs to be responsible for managing them.

- All Societies and Committees are insured (third party public liability insurance) for their ‘usual’ activities. These are the activities that the original committee applied to do in their new society application which were then written into their Constitution. If you wish to do any other activity, trip or event where there might be a risk of a member or the
general public being injured, you will need to complete a risk assessment and, for trips and events, some related safety paperwork. Please refer to the Rules and Safety Handbook in the Zone Online for further information about health and safety.

- Although you need to oversee everything your group does, it may be useful to delegate health and safety liaison to a suitably experienced member of the committee.

4. Motivating the Committee
- A President/Chair will always have the central aims of the society or committee at the forefront of their mind – but this is not always shared by all the members. It can be particularly difficult to motivate the committee if you are low on numbers, if cliques form or if people are disheartened for some reason. However, there are lots of ways to keep everyone excited and motivated (see ‘What if there are Problems?’ below).
- Being available to provide advice and support for members throughout the year where necessary is crucial. Encourage your committee members to tell you when something is going wrong. If you have a VP, liaising between disgruntled committee members and yourself may be a key role they could play. Open and transparent communication systems tend to mean that people feel motivated for longer.
- Make sure you run team-building sessions and activities (see below for ideas) but also committee socials. These can be delegated to the Social Secretary. Remember that, for the purposes of society or committee’s reputation and inclusion, socials shouldn’t always involve alcohol.
- Reward committee members whenever they do something to contribute. You don’t need to buy gifts - just an encouraging word can have a positive effect!

5. Communicating
- **Internal**: The President/Chair introduces meetings and provides guidance for the committee. You ensure your group is represented at relevant meetings. You are also responsible for ensuring the committee attends any relevant Students’ Union training – this is useful but is also part of the criteria for committee members to gain recognition on their HEAR (Higher Education Achievement Report).
- **External**: The President/Chair needs to decide upon a system for reading and actioning emails. This may fall to the Secretary as communication is a large part of their role. The President/Chair may wish to write (or delegate the writing of) press releases and passing on information about future events and positive news to the publicity officer on Societies Committee or the Activities & Sports Zone. The President/Chair is also the first point of contact in media relations, and must make sure the Publicity Officer is actively promoting successes to the student body. For more
information about publicity, please see ‘Marketing & Publicity’ guide on the Zone Online.

6. Calling and Chairing Meetings

- Chairing committee meetings is a main activity of the President/Chair although it is usually the Secretary who pulls together the agenda before committee meetings and writes and sends out the minutes afterwards. Meetings are the perfect opportunity to inject enthusiasm into the committee members and discuss upcoming events whilst enabling discussion/feedback on previous events and activities. It is important to learn what worked well, and what could be improved upon and to give everyone the opportunity to have their say in an open and safe atmosphere.

- Use the agenda to keep the discussions relevant, to keep the meeting on track and ensure that the appropriate decisions are made.

- Ensure all points on the agenda are covered, and that if they are not, arrange a time to reconvene – this must be noted in the minutes.

- Ensure all members have the opportunity to voice their opinions, whilst avoiding irrelevant small talk.

- No one person should dominate. It is the duty of the chair of the meeting to enforce democracy and ensure that quieter committee members have a say.

- Ensure all identified tasks are clearly delegated to individuals (or a small team) – and then oversee those undertaking the activities. You must manage the committee members in a way that ensures they all pull their weight, and have a chance to get involved and demonstrate their skills.

- Make sure that everyone notes down what they are supposed to do and by what date. This keeps them focussed on their tasks and allows you to know things have been noted down by both the Secretary in the minutes and also by the individuals involved.

- Keep in regular contact with your team to make sure tasks are being completed – remember; the buck stops with you. However, by encouraging a vibrant committee spirit and making sure all members are properly trained your committee can take some of the pressure of your shoulders!

- Remember – not all committee members will read the minutes (even though they should) therefore the Secretary should insert committee member tasks and the associated deadlines in the body of the email, ensuring everyone will have easy access to the most important information.

- Committee members must be aware that if they can’t complete a delegated task, due to other commitments, they must inform you, so that it can be re-delegated.

- The President/Chair should advise and support all members with their tasks. The Activities Zone Desk team are valuable resources; they are there to help you budget for events, pass on financial statements and even provide ideas for future events and activities.

- Post-meeting socials are usually well received. They will help your committee to bond and work better as a team.
Communicate with your social secretary to arrange such events and ensure they are as inclusive as possible.

**Now onto leadership skills:**
What skills does a President/Chair require? The skills you will most use will depend on some extent to the specific needs of the committee. This diagram shows you a summary of some really useful leadership skills that you should develop during your time in office. Remember to visit the Careers Service (www.shef.ac.uk/careers) to learn how to effectively show off the skills you have acquired to future employers. These will include:

Goal-setting; organising; delegating; team-building; decision-making; prioritising; communicating; motivating; inspiring and listening!

Hopefully now you can see that being a President/Chair of a society will take you through a brilliant learning curve – and will hopefully be an enjoyable role too.

Do not be daunted though! There is lots of support available from the Activities Zone staff (activities@shef.ac.uk) and the Zone Online.

**What if there are problems?**
Below are three suggestions that you can try if you feel that things aren’t quite going as planned:

1. Committee bonding and re-training
2. Holding members to account
3. Rewarding members

**Committee Bonding and Re-Training**
Whether you are experiencing problems or not, it might be a good idea to think about having a bonding session to plan the semester ahead – in a fun way!

1) Society/Committee Development Day
- Bring the committee together for a fun bonding session and work out what you want to achieve together this semester.
- Get everyone enthused about the projects ahead, and clarify everyone’s roles and responsibilities on the committee and what is expected from them, so everyone feels in the know and comfortable.
- Incorporate a fun activity into the day so everyone has a chance to talk socially and make friends. Snacks and soft drinks go down well if you are able to organise refreshments.

2) Constitution and Roles
- Every Society, Working and Representative Committee must have its own personalised constitution, based on the SU’s. This allows you to define your aims and objectives. You can view your current Constitution here: bit.ly/201617Constitutions
- You can decide the aims and objectives together: get out some big sheets of paper and thick felt-tips and break the committee down into little groups throwing out ideas of what they think your committee should be aiming to do, what the basic reasons are for existing.
- Then draw out the different committee positions and how they
work together to achieve this – so that everyone writes out their roles and all the details that entails. Then you can rewrite your Constitution but also a description of roles that everyone can sign and knowingly agree to what they are signing up to. This gives every committee member the security to know what responsibilities lie with them.

3) Team Values
- In addition, set some “team values” – values you think the committee share to make working together easy: e.g. phones off in meetings; listen to one another; if you agree to do something – follow through – if you can’t, let the President/Chair know ASAP; don’t be afraid to ask for help and be creative!
- Remember, it is best if values come from the committee itself, so let them throw out these ideas, and from all the ideas formulate the list you then circulate to everyone. It might be best to do this in small groups that feed back together.

4) Plan the Semester Ahead
- As this guide has shown you, the role of the President/Chair is to think of the bigger picture and to co-ordinate all the activities of the society or committee. However, your committee members will be so much more on-board if they are the ones driving the vision. Ask your members what they would like to see their society or committee providing for them i.e. why did they join in the first place?
- Perhaps go back to basics and run a ‘thought shower’ exercise to get everyone thinking creatively about the semester ahead and plan what you would like the committee to achieve. Set goals and targets, plan dates of socials and talk to the inclusion officer about how everything you do can be inclusive and welcoming.
- Try ‘road mapping’ the year ahead: split the committee up into teams who look at different things the committee wishes to achieve. The teams then draw out a ‘road’ for the semester on a big piece of paper and ‘travel’ the road, to set the milestones and the barriers along the way. This is a great way to get the committee sharing the vision for the weeks ahead – and willing to back the projects!

5) Zone Online and Students’ Union Support
- After you’ve established on paper for yourselves the roles of your committee, it’s helpful to print off the relevant guides for each committee from the Zone Online.
- If you are struggling at all with any aspect of leading your committee, come and chat to the staff at the:

Activities Zone Desk – or email them: activities@shef.ac.uk