

Getting Organized through Charters: Practical Tips from the Field
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Do you recognize the following situation? You are a recently appointed leader or a member of a newly created group who has a directional mandate for conducting advisory work. While everyone seems to be generally on the same page, when it comes to certain aspects of conducting the work such as feedback-gathering, decision-making or collaborating with other groups, there is a lot of confusion, ambiguity and, perhaps, chaos.

If you nodded your head while reading this (admittedly broad) description, you may be in need of a charter for your group! We recognize that a charter is not necessarily the “sexiest” topic - in fact, it can be easy to dismiss as technocratic busywork. Yet, we have found that it can be tremendously useful for shaping various governance processes and for making sure that all group members develop a common mental model for the way work is done, both within a group and while working with others.

Charter Example

We recently completed a six-months process of creating a [charter for the Kentucky United We Learn Council](#). This body is composed of more than 70 different stakeholders from across Kentucky who are working together in different committees and working groups to advise the Kentucky Board of Education on issues related to reimagining assessment and accountability work in the Commonwealth.

An initial draft of the charter was created in a small, five-person working group that we were a part of. It was then reviewed internally by representatives from the state department for compliance with legal requirements. For example, they looked at existing policies that governed which types of information can be shared publicly as part of the work, what kind of authority that the council has versus other governing bodies, and how voting needs to take place.

Members then had a chance to provide feedback on the charter and eventually voted on the current version to ratify it for use. The charter is now a public document that allows anyone within and outside the state to understand how the council governs. Moreover, there is a process in place to review this charter annually and to make adjustments as needed.

Benefits of Charters

As this example illustrates, there are many benefits of charters. Perhaps most critically, they act as a transparent, one-stop-shop for capturing key guardrails that affect the daily work of the different groups that have to work together to support effective governance processes. In the example above, the charter was created for a stakeholder advisory body, but charters can, of course, also be created for groups within an existing organization.

Charters are especially helpful in times of onboarding or leadership turnover, which can put organizations in a vulnerable position. When leadership changes unexpectedly, charters can be

reviewed at multiple levels of the organization to give everyone an opportunity to refresh themselves on their collective purpose. Moreover, it can help to uncover new emerging staffing or upskilling needs or adjustments to ways of working that have been established for a while.

In this way, working through a charter can be a useful group building activity. People generally enjoy talking about their strengths. Most also like taking on a new challenge and contributing meaningfully to a group's purpose. Talking through core values, purpose and objectives can give group members a fresh perspective on their own work and the refresh they need to dig their heels back in for another cycle of work.

Finally, charters offer group members a place to see in writing that their perspectives have been heard and have been incorporated into guardrails for the work of their group, thereby signaling that contributions are truly valued and have an impact on the group's functioning.

Creating a Charter

So how do you go about creating a charter? As the saying goes, this is a bit of an art and a science. Here are some recommendations that we offer up based on our joint experience so far:

- Put a relatively small group of about two to five people in charge who have an appreciation for details and for the complexities of using clear and differentiated language to capture complex ideas,
- Do not see the charter as an endpoint, but part of the process of making the group function smoothly and effectively,
- Translate the key ideas of the charter into other recommendations that can be used for professional development purposes,
- In the case of doubt, especially during early iterations, go broader and articulate all aspects that may strike you as relevant and articulate all necessary assumptions,
- Seek input from representatives of all relevant stakeholder groups during the charter development and refinement process and make sure that they can provide input in ways that work for them,
- Approve the charter through a formal voting process, ideally already mimicking the process that the charter outlines,
- Share the charter with all members and the leaders of other groups that the group in question is working with, and
- View the charter as a living document that should be updated occasionally as new insights are gained and lessons are learned.

In addition, we offer up the following table, which includes suggestions for structuring a charter. As always, local adaptations are needed to make the charter you create work effectively as a rhetorical and governance tool for your purposes.

We hope that you find this guidance useful to your own work - please do not hesitate to reach out to us with questions, suggestions or additional examples of publicly accessible charters that you have found useful in your own work!

Table 1 - *Components of Charters with Brief Descriptions*

Aspect	Component	Focus
General	Name	The name of the group as well as its acronym
	Mission	The main goals for the group in one or a few sentences
Activities	Work	The kind of work that the group is doing, ideally illustrated by calling out particular examples
	Deliverables	The kind of work products that the group is likely to produce, especially for external communication but also internally
	Meetings	The main mechanisms by which in-person or virtual meetings are held with a description of how many there are in a given year or relevant time frame
Connections	Relations	The main ways of how the group liaisons with other groups, including departments, groups or other governance/advisory/policy groups
	Authority	The main actions the group is authorized to take as well as the authority that other groups have to act upon the recommendations of the group
Members	Positions	The main positions of the group, including who is eligible, how they are appointed, the terms for each position, and how evaluations are done
	Responsibilities	The common activities for each position, often articulated as part of the descriptions for specific positions
Collaboration	Feedback	The main mechanisms by which informal feedback is provided on documents or other works in progress, both live and offline, including expressions of preference and disagreement
	Decisions	The main mechanisms by which more formal decisions are being made, which often include voting, including considerations of quorums for different contexts
Information	Access	The main mechanisms by which documents can be accessed online, including rules or principles for sharing outside of the group
	Records	The main mechanisms by which learnings are captured, which may include deliverables, notes and various types of online communication
Practices	Mindsets	Mindsets, principles and best practices for how members act with one another in virtual and in-person settings, ideally illustrated with examples
	Support	Various types of administrative or technological support that are available to support the effective working of the group
	Revision	The cadence and mechanisms by which the charter is updated