by Larry J. Gordon

A story, probably a fable, went the rounds in the health department a few years ago. According to the story, a group of employees went to see the health director in his office. They had come to ask why boards and committees which had long since ceased to produce, in some cases even to meet, were appointed or reappointed year after year. The director became angry and red-faced as they pressed him for convincing reasons. Finally, pounding his desk, he shouted his answer. "There isn't any reason for those committees. They're just part of our policy."

Almost every organization in America has some features and patterns which are matters of custom, or of "policy" as the health director in the fable named it. These patterns -- a list of officers to be elected each year, a roster of boards to be appointed, a board composed and selected in some particular way -- are normally assumed as part of the unexamined social heritage of the organization. No one may know just how they contribute to the stated purposes and ongoing program. When people question just how they do contribute, those of us responsible for keeping the organization going are tempted to get red-faced and defensive.

Quite a bit of the distinctive drama of democracy takes place in the board meeting. To the superficial eye the daily crop of tens of thousands of small gatherings in America (estimate at 5-75 thousand per day) are merely sedentary circles of bodies. But a deeper look sees more. It sees groups of human beings assembled to build, destroy, inspire, divide, foment, give form to dreams, compete, compromise, aspire. And through the medium of this throng of good, the bad, the frequently mediocre, the sometimes excellent, the human spirit drives to accomplish far-reaching social objectives. Where these circles of people sit, invisible castles are taking shape, leaders are being formed, segments of our future are born.

The importance of all this is something to ponder over. The leaders of the ancients won support by their eloquence at the forums, by their valor in battle, by their personal magnetism. When Ben Franklin formed the Junto and the Junto sparked the formation of dozens of other bodies, he was contributing to the modern democracy of groups. The American process was under way. Leaders were called in from horseback to council chambers to decide matters by the jousts of minds. Town meetings, clubs, sects, lodges, associations flowered in the American soil. The methodology and the sociability of America became to a great extent a matter of groups. No doubt the enlarging of towns into cities contributed. People must live in small-scale social contexts, and when they lost their towns they formed clubs. Today there is an organized society of some sort for every hundred Americans, a grand roster of a million and a half. Counting the boards of government agencies and of business, the number is still greater. And each of these has committees, boards, and the like.

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Thus the matter of how boards, committees, groups are led and how they arrive at decisions and plan actions is a highly consequential matter to the American culture in general and to the democratic process in particular.

As long as there is a sharp dividing line between citizens and public official groups, it is difficult to overcome the tendency toward suspicion and misunderstanding on the part of each. We frequently hear of this problem being demonstrated in various communities, by the misunderstandings and suspicions between the health department and industry. It would be naive to suggest a return to the "good old days" of the town meeting and of administration by part-time laymen. However, some modifications of the practice of complete segregation are desirable. The lay citizen can be made to supplement rather than to supplant the technical or professional public servant in a number of ways. Advisory boards are being used in many areas at present and their possibilities are far from being exhausted. Some such boards have been beneficial in the capacity of general advisory bodies on many public health matters, while in other cases they have been confined to very specific activities or programs.

These boards should not be "used" or "abused". They function most enthusiastically when their advice is sincerely sought and their views are given full consideration. Public health advisory board members are important people, willing to contribute time and effort to the advancement or improvement of their public health programs and are interested in public service. They want to help, to contribute, and to advise, but they will quickly recognize and resist any attempts to use them and will not long tolerate "abuse". Business and labor leaders who participate in advisory boards soon recognize that good public health practices are "good business". Public health administrators who continue to work with advisory boards realize their programs, policies and regulations are more likely to be accepted and followed when developed with the advice and experience of those who are expected to comply.

Expanding needs in public health necessitate additional staff, new equipment and added facilities. Competition for the tax dollar necessitates selling new programs to budget-establishing officials. The chances of success are greatly enhanced when affected groups which would normally resist new regulations have participated in developing the program and are active in its support.

With the broadening concept of public health programs, it is important that public health administrators fully explore the advisability of working with advisory boards in administering established programs and in developing those new programs that are essential. The value of this approach has been demonstrated by health agencies throughout the country.

With all the important things we do through boards, sometimes we seem to have an awful lot of trouble with them. They take so much of our time -- and sometimes seem to get so little done! Boards have been described, by a frustrated member, as "small groups of people which
keep minutes and waste hours". And sometimes this description is a little too true for comfort.

Why have boards? Boards are appointed, or elected or drafter, for a purpose. They have an assignment to do within a specified time. Boards have jobs to do -- planning a series of programs, or studying community conditions, or working out agreements between a number of organizations, or settling grievances, or developing better working relationships between agencies.

One requirement for improving the work of the boards that demand so much of our time and energy, and on which we depend for so much work, is that THE PURPOSE of the committee should be clearly defined. The appointing authority, whether the director, or the commission, should define the purpose of the board, spell out its job, its responsibilities and its duties. The board's limits should be detailed, too -- the time span for which it is appointed, its budget, if any, how far it is supposed to go and where it is expected to stop.

Too often appointing authorities respond to the suggestion, "Let's appoint a board", without answering the question, "Why?" How can a board work effectively if it doesn't know what it is supposed to do? Is this committee necessary? Sometimes the suggestion, "Let's appoint a board" should be answered with: "Let's not!" Many boards should never have been appointed. And it is past time that others should be re-examined and their purposes re-defined. Too many of our organizations have dangling committees and dead-but-unburied boards, committees that wander in the wilderness and boards that shoot off in the dark. Sometimes we give a board a task that could be done better by one person. And sometimes we give one an assignment assuming a settled policy where it hasn't been settled.

A board may be composed of members of the organization, representatives of groups within the organization, specialists or consultants from the outside, or representatives of a number of organizations or representatives of the entire community. The functions of the board should determine the composition of the group.

As to number, cynics have said that the ideal size of a board is three -- with two out of town. This, of course, misses the reason for having boards in the first place, which is to enable several persons to pool their resources, experiences and interests in solving a problem or doing a job, which one person couldn't do as well.

Depending on its job, the board may require among its membership men or women with specific competencies or backgrounds. Or it may require that certain special interests, groups of people, or points of view be represented. One board might require labor and management representatives, another scientific and technical personnel, another Protestant and Catholic and Jewish members, another property owners and renters, another persons from various nationality groups.
And within any one group, various segments and interests may need to be represented on a board -- people from the West Side and the East Side, people for and against the proposal, people who back Jones and people who back Smith, people who want to have the annual meeting in Central City and people who want to have it in Camp Owasso. A board cannot effectively perform its job unless its membership includes all the persons necessary to carry out that job.

The growth of advisory boards during the past several years has been phenomenal. Few institutions of social control have multiplied as rapidly. Privately run community organizations use them -- the "Y", the Scouts, the fund drives. They have proved valuable to local, state and federal officials. The Federal government with its multifarious activities has thousands of them.

The pity is, that with all its virtues, the advisory board should so often be misunderstood, neglected, misused, or abused. Clearly, what is needed is fuller appreciation of both its potentialities and its limitations -- and a heightened awareness of how it can most effectively be used.

The reason every program leader or administrator gives when he creates an advisory board is that he wants advice. Often this is the most economical and convenient method of obtaining it. Frequently, men and women whose main interests lie elsewhere are willing to spend a few hours each week or month as members of an advisory group. Advice and recommendations which would sell at a high price in the World of business are thus made available to the program for little or no actual outlay. Scientists, lawyers, businessmen, housewives, and engineers -- to name a few -- have shown a willingness to contribute in this way to the public good.

The advice that a board is able to give is not confined to the substance of the program. It is also important as a guide to public opinion -- what the public wants done, what it will be likely to accept, and what it will not. This is why the representatives of important interests are so often invited to serve. At the community level, this may include the church groups, the League of Women Voters, and the service clubs. The board has been described as "an invaluable instrument for breaking administrative measures on the back of the public". This is an important service, as any conscientious but hard-pressed administrator knows -- an opportunity for hoisting trial balloons in private.

But advice is only the beginning. Advisory boards can often help to achieve agreement in controversial subject areas. As members get to know and respect each other, they grow more tolerant of differing views. And persons who agree on broad objectives can usually come to agree on methods as well.

Pooling their resources of information and judgment, they will frequently be able to accomplish together what might be out of reach for them individually. Moreover, the well-informed good-will that a board often generates can be a potent instrument for interpreting the program to the public. It is not necessary for the advisory
board to endorse everything the organization does, or, for that matter, to support it at all. Explaining its point of view and participating in public information programs is useful.

No hard and fast distinctions exist between advising and doing, and many a capable leader has asked for help from his advisors in the performance of such internal assignments as the making of tours of inspection, or the preparation of special studies.

The advisory board has certain tangential uses no thoughtful administrator will overlook. It is made to order for the person who neither wants nor desires a full-time assignment, but does "want to do something". By its nature -- i.e., the giving of advice -- the board cannotes prestige. As one said: "We didn't want Joe in the program, but we couldn't leave him out. That's why we put him on our advisory board". In the governmental area, it is sometimes used for patronage.

Yet, despite all these uses, many administrators -- perhaps most -- see their advisory board only as a means of obtaining support. They appoint it with this in mind and are disappointed if it doesn't deliver. The members are selected on a calculated basis, their prestige weighed and their pliability assessed. At the community level, the process is attended by such remarks as "So and so will help us" and "we'll certainly need the support of the Everyone's League" -- as if it could be easily bought and sold. The process is no different at the national level. But the game is bigger and the plotters more ingenious.

Wanting support, however, is a far cry from getting it; and the man who creates an advisory board may have no talent for using it. Indeed, it may come to be a hindrance both to him and the program. This is why it is prudent to examine some of the risks that may be involved.

Fortunately, the dangers inherent in the use of advisory boards are often so slow in evolving that the board will have run its course before real trouble develops. Nevertheless, they should be weighed before the board is created. If they outweigh the advantages, the advisory board should never be set up.

Risks are probably less at the community than at the state or national levels. For one thing, local people know each other more intimately. Also, the stakes are less. Something of a minor consequence to a local leader may be of primary importance to the national master.

But, local or national, it is always possible that a major difference of opinion will develop between the advisory board and the leadership of the program it is to advise. Sometimes this will remain a family secret; sometimes it will result in a kind of compromise; but sometimes it will burst forth to rock the community.
Many times, the existence of a board serves as a brake on effective action -- one more obstacle which the administrator must hurdle. And sometimes, even, the board will impede, rather than facilitate, popular support for a program. This last possibility is usually overlooked entirely.

There is also the danger that members will seek to use their Board positions to serve personal (or non-organization) ends.

Any such advisory group requires considerable expenditure of departmental time if the group is to be kept informed, interested, and thereby be useful. The administrator must continually think of means to help interpret his agency to the board; to make certain that the board members understand the philosophy and operations of the health program; and to make certain that board members are equipped to interpret health services to their friends and associates and to answer criticisms and questions. With these things in mind, a department should not attempt to utilize any more such advisory groups than it has time to work with.

Another drawback for the use of advisory groups in some communities has been that, at times, the group has become involved in administrative matters rather than in serving as an advisory group. In many cases, this has been the fault of the department involved in that the administrator has not taken the time or trouble to properly indoctrinate the members and work with them.

A basic administrative rule is that an individual can only be responsible to one boss. Whenever an advisory board attempts to become involved in administrative matters, the administrator involved may end up being supervised by two or more individuals or groups, and a two-headed monster is thereby created.

It is proper at this point to ask what can be done to make the advisory board a useful and effective device of social control.

In the first place, the board must never be thought of primarily in terms of the support its members can give. This is an error as fatal as it is tempting. The support of the members of an advisory board is a by-product, not an objective, of the program -- a reward, never a purpose.

For the full value of the advisory board to be obtained, certain steps must be taken. The board, for example, must have a clearly understood function. Its size must be related to what it is to do, its members selected with care. Its meetings must be thoughtfully planned and organized. There must be voluntary participation.

The board must be wanted. Moreover, it must be wanted by the person it is to advise. This may sound like fatuous advice. Actually, many board (most?) in government are handed down from one administrator to another; the new administrator does not even get to choose the members. Small wonder that it is often shunted into the background and never really used.
In the community, many programs have advisory boards because it is expected of them. The leader may not want them, but others do. In such cases the chances that they will make much of a contribution are not great.

Many of the problems and some of the dangers in the use of advisory boards stem from a failure of members to know what is expected of them. This does not necessarily mean a written definition of function, although one is certainly to be recommended. It does mean, however, a real understanding of what will be involved.

Is the board one whose advice is being seriously sought? Or is the word "advisory" the window dressing to capitalize on the members' prestige? Is assistance wanted, or only moral support? If the latter, perhaps some other term than "advisory board" should be used.

Most men and women who accept advisory board assignment today are sophisticated enough to understand some of the implications of their selection. They know that they are chosen for their prestige and influence as well as their expertness. Their major reservation is that not too much of a burden be placed upon them, either time-wise or policy-wise. Ordinarily they will not make an issue of it if their advice is not followed.

There are exceptions, of course. These most frequently come about when members feel misled or presumed upon; or when they have been openly antagonized by those conducting the program. Even so, an explosion is by no means inevitable. More often than not, disgruntled members swallow their differences -- and their pride -- and merge quietly into the background. But if sufficiently inflamed, they are capable of rebellion; and any leader who has faced this situation will not want it repeated.

Who should be members? It is a maxim that "members should be selected with care". Put into context, this means that the members should be men and women of reasonable manner and approach, whatever their views. The professional publicity seeker should be shunned. Too often his objectives and those of the other board members will fail to coincide.

How Much Self-Rule? In many instances, board members select their own chairman, or he is appointed from among them. This is often regarded as proof of the board's independence and something to be desired.

There is growing support, however, for the view that the chairman should be an official of the agency or the program. The members advise him. There is nothing unwholesome or undemocratic about this arrangement. It emphasizes unitary control and minimizes duality of leadership.

For the most part, the preceding discussion has been related to the use of advisory groups. In accordance with the instruction of your program committee, I will now briefly cover certain official
boards and commissions which have activities relating to the promotion of public health in New Mexico. From the onset let's make it clear that it would be a tremendous undertaking to discuss every such official board so I have, of necessity, been selective. I have also totally ignored the important work of the huge number of advisory groups which relate to activities of various Federal health agencies.

As far as official boards or commissions go, the State Board of Public Health is obviously the backbone of public health in New Mexico. In one way or another all organized official public health activities operate under the jurisdiction of the State Board of Public Health. Along with the director and other officers and employees the Board of Public Health constitutes the New Mexico Department of Public Health and the management and control of the State Health Department is vested in the State Board of Public Health. The powers of the State Board of Public Health are to be found in a number of statutes. Inasmuch as most full-time public health workers have had numerous occasions to study the statutes relating to the powers of the State Board of Health I am sure it would be superfluous and even boring for me to quote any of these in detail.

Other boards with which we are all familiar but which, in my opinion have not been effectively utilized on a statewide basis, are the District Health Board. In fact, we frequently encounter health department employees who do not know that such boards exist and I have been advised that District Health Boards do not, in fact, always exist for various reasons. However, the statutes state that "In each health district there shall be created a district health board, consisting of one (1) member appointed biennially by each board of county commissioners within the district. The appointed members shall serve terms of four (4) years. The members of the district health board shall serve without compensation of any kind, other than for actual and necessary travel expense not to exceed twenty-five dollars ($25.00) per member per year from county health funds. They shall meet once per year regularly to receive the annual report of the district health officer and meet at any other time upon call of the chairman."

I do not know that the make-up of the District Health Board for a one-county-district has ever been officially determined. However, I am advised that the Bernalillo County Commissioners recently appointed a 3-member advisory board on personal health and preventive medicine. This arrangement would seem to suffice inasmuch as powers of a district health board are obviously considerably limited and really amount to little more than an officially created advisory group.

Some New Mexico cities have created health advisory boards by ordinance. These groups have been extremely valuable by giving freely of their time and advice and thereby helping to formulate and promote more effective health programs within these communities.
I cannot be too lavish in my praise for our own health advisory board and individual members thereof. They have given freely of their time and advice on numerous occasions and, even when not meeting officially, individual members have continued to be extremely beneficial and have served as an extension of the health agency to help in various ways in the community, and to advise the department of feelings and problems in the community.

Another board officially created by legislation is the State Radiation Technical Advisory Council. The statutes regarding this reads, in part, as follows: "There is established in the department a "state radiation technical advisory council" consisting of five (5) members. The members shall be appointed by the governor, after consultation with the director of the department, for five-year terms. The governor shall fill any vacancy occurring on the council. The replacement appointee shall serve the remainder of the original members unexpired term. It is the duty of the council to advise the department on technical matters relating to ionizing radiation."

I know that this has been another board which has been interested, active, helpful and influential in matters regarding ionizing radiation.

When we come to the local level, state statutes provide for large number of boards and commissions, many of which have activities and powers which involve public health matters. Therefore, at the county and municipal level I have had to be even more selective.

One extremely important board is provided for in NMSA 14-7-10, and is known as the Annexation Arbitration Board. Such a board may be set up jointly by a city and county to have the final authority in controversial annexation matters. Inasmuch as annexation of urban fringe areas frequently is based on public health situations within the area, the functions and powers of annexation arbitration boards should be of interest to all health officials. The statute setting up such boards reads in part as follows: "The board of arbitration shall determine if the benefits of the government of the municipality are or can be available within a reasonable time to the territory proposed to be annexed and make such investigation as it may deem advisable in order to obtain information and data as to the availability of the benefits of the municipal government and may require the governing body of the municipality to furnish to it any records of the municipality pertaining thereto. Determination by a majority of the seven (7) members of the board of arbitration shall be final."

Another commission which has activities officially relating to public health is known as a municipal boundary commission. This commission was authorized by the State Legislature as a state-level commission to determine the annexation of territories to municipalities whenever (a) the municipality petitions the municipal boundary commission to annex territories to the municipality; and (b) a majority of the land owners of the territory proposed to be annexed petition the municipal boundary commission to annex the territory to the municipality. As with annexation arbitration boards, the
deliberations and decisions of the municipal boundary commission may frequently involve public health matters.

In order of listing within the statutes, we next find reference to the powers of municipalities in New Mexico are not as great as many of us would like to see, we have very little complaint when it comes to the powers regarding public health. For example, the statutes state that the governing body of a municipality may adopt legislation for the purpose of "providing for the safety, preserving the health, promoting the prosperity, improving the morals, order, comfort and convenience of the municipality and its inhabitants." Another section of the Statutes state "The municipality may regulate the sale of food and drink and may provide for the peace and manner of selling food; inspection and regulation of food; regulation, inspection, weighing and measuring of any article of merchandise; inspection and selling of weights and measures; and enforcement and use of proper weights and measures by vendors.

A municipal governing board also has such powers as (1) being able to direct the location, regulate and prohibit any offensive business or establishment within one mile of its boundary; and (2) define a nuisance, abate a nuisance and impose penalties.

The local planning commission is another highly important but frequently overlooked local group. The World Health Organization's Expert Committee on "Health and Sanitary Aspects of Metropolitan Planning, Housing and Industry" reports that "With respect to health-related aspects for the problem, the health agency has an important responsibility in the planning function. If the planners are to develop effective programs they must rely on the environmental health profession for guidelines, standards, and justification. There is no more effective way of justifying planning standards than to relate them directly to health standards. The problem faced by the planner, therefore, in the final analysis, is a health problem."

The powers of municipal planning commissions are, in my opinion, quite broad. A planning commission may "(1) make reports and recommendations for the planning and developing of the municipality to (a) public officials and agencies; (b) public utility groups; (c) civic, professional, and educational groups and other organizations and (d) citizens; and (2) recommend to the administrative officials of the municipality programs for public improvements and their financing." Municipal planning commissions also have extra-territorial jurisdiction ranging from 3 to 10 miles beyond the municipal limits, depending upon the size of the municipality.

State statutes also provide for county or municipal zoning authorities which may promulgate regulations and restrictions designed to (among other things):
1. Lessen congestion in the streets and public ways;
2. Secure safety from fire, panic and other dangers;
3. Promote health and the general welfare;
4. Provide adequate light and air;
5. Prevent the overcrowding of land;
6. Avoid undue concentration of population;
7. Facilitate adequate provision for transportation, water, sewerage, schools, parks, and other public requirements;
8. Control and abate the unsightly use of buildings or land.

Another statute allows a municipality to "(a) appoint a board of health and prescribe its powers and duties; and (b) perform any action and adopt any regulation necessary or expedient for the promotion of health and the suppression of disease". To my knowledge the first portion of this law has been little used. However, probably all municipalities have widely used the second portion of the statute.

With regard to county commissions we all know of their importance in providing budgetary support for public health activities. However, another important power is that of the power to enact ordinances. To date, such power to enact ordinances has been delegated only to Class H counties (Los Alamos) and Class A counties (Bernalillo). However, these two counties "are granted the same powers to enact ordinances as granted to municipalities. Public health officials in New Mexico might wish to consider if it would be desirable to attempt to obtain legislative authority for all county commissions to adopt ordinances."