

COMMUNITY BUILDING

HELPING ACTION GROUPS SUCCEED

Effective leadership, open communication, coordination of efforts, celebration and participatory planning are just a few elements of healthy communities. The same principles apply to effective action groups working on community-defined projects.

Characteristics of effective action groups include regular organized meetings, the value of contributions and time of each group member, planning, communicating openly, recognizing people's capacities, talents and interests and matching them to required tasks. Also, follow-through on commitments; seeking and valuing diversity; asking everyone to contribute; taking risks; evaluating and reflecting on their actions; solution-oriented and flexible; embracing shared leadership from within the group; and celebrating successes of all sizes.

Most productive groups have effective leaders to coordinate and guide their work. Group work often requires people to fill many different roles. Effective leaders coordinate these roles to help the group stay active and on task. These roles include facilitation, asking for information or ideas, giving information or opinions, making decisions, clarifying points, summarizing, suggesting direction, checking for agreement. Group building roles include encouraging others; including others; active listening; suggesting compromise; relieving tension; helping to solve problems; expressing feelings; and finding common ground. Effective leaders share leadership with group members and empower them to take on different and sometimes challenging roles.

Regardless of the size or the project, most groups go through phases in a developmental process. Recognizing these phases and knowing what to expect in each can help group members get through them and go on to achieving goals.

Forming	Involves getting acquainted, defining tasks and goals, and taking first steps. Members may be anxious or confused. Leaders should provide direction.
Storming	Involves exploring options and reassessing initial decisions. Members may experience tension or conflict, or, if not much progress is made, leave the group. Leaders should act as coaches.
Norming	Involves resolution, evaluation, and decision making. Members may become so cohesive they don't say what they think. Leaders should make sure all opinions are heard.
Performing	Involves implementing decisions and action. Leaders should delegate responsibilities.
Transforming	Transforming- Involves regrouping, disbanding, or letting go. Members may try to hold on or express disappointment with change. Leader role depends on action of group.

Communication and coordination, both within and outside the group, is important for the success of action groups. Frequent communication to the community about the group's actions and progress is important to attract and retain volunteers and community interest. It's difficult for community members to get involved if they don't know what's going on. Frequent effective community communication is the key to keeping community members connected, informed, involved, interested and supportive of issues, projects and activities. In addition, action groups should contact local, county, state and federal agencies which can provide technical assistance and/or resources to the project. Coordination of activities with existing community and regional groups and organizations which share interests is important for the efficient use of human, physical and financial resources, and to avoid duplicate efforts.

Successful action groups plan how to attract, use and work with their volunteers for the benefit of everyone involved. With careful planning, many groups build momentum for projects by making full use of the existing talent pool, recognizing and rewarding volunteers' efforts, and constantly exploring approaches to increase and coordinate both the number and diversity of volunteers.

A very important part of group work is celebration. Celebrations - whether to recognize the accomplishments of one person or the achievements of many - are opportunities to build healthier groups and promote a sense of community. Highly visible public recognition builds the self-esteem of group members, builds a sense of community belonging and of working together to achieve shared goals. By working as a group, members come to know and care about one another. A high level of participation in celebrating achievements as well as in the work helps reinforces people's common stake in reaching group goals.

Whatever the project size, most successes are achieved with planning. Why should your group develop an action plan? An inspirational expression says, "People don't plan to fail. Instead they fail to plan." As your group wants to succeed, it makes sense to take all the steps necessary to ensure success, including developing an action plan.

Reasons to work out the details of your project in an action plan include:

- ❖ To lend credibility to your project. An action plan shows the community your project is well ordered and dedicated to getting things done.
- ❖ To be sure you don't overlook any details.
- ❖ To understand what is and isn't possible for your group to do.
- ❖ To save time, energy and resources in the long run.
- ❖ To increase the chances people will do what needs to be done.

An action plan is a way to make sure a group's vision is made concrete. It describes the way a group will use its strategies to meet its objectives. An action plan consists of a number of steps. Each action step should include the following information:

- ❖ What actions or changes will occur
- ❖ Who carries out these changes
- ❖ By when will they take place, and for how long
- ❖ What resources are needed to carry out these changes
- ❖ Communication (who should know what?)

Developing an action plan gives you a blueprint for running your project. Remember an action plan is always a work in progress. It isn't something to develop and then put away and forget about. Keep it visible, constantly refer to it, and adjust when necessary to help the group move forward to success.

Resources:

Building Communities from the Grassroots - Community Development Academy, University of Missouri.

Kouzes, J.M. & Posner, B.Z., (1999). Encouraging the heart: A leader's guide to rewarding and recognizing others. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

The Community Tool Box, Kansas State University, (<http://ctb.lsi.ukans.edu/tools/>)