

COMMUNITY BUILDING

HELPING ACTION GROUPS SUCCEED

Best Practices

Being part of an action group working on a community-defined project can be extremely rewarding. It can also present many challenges, including those related to leadership, communication and/or coordination, resource development and planning. In light of all the challenges, the following are important points to consider:

- ❖ Facilities may set the tone for meetings. Community members who don't attend church may decide not to participate if meetings are held in churches. Government offices such as town halls may be intimidating to others. Discover from the start what sites would be favorable to members.
- ❖ Select a meeting space large enough to accommodate the group with room for movement. Have extra chairs on hand. Make sure participants can see each other. Make sure any needed materials and equipment are available.
- ❖ Ensure group meetings are effective and organized. This includes:
 - providing name tags if people don't know each other.
 - establishing a specific purpose for the meeting.
 - starting and finishing on time.
 - having an agenda and keeping on track, with some flexibility for appropriate discussion.
 - not allowing members to dominate the discussion, argue, redirect the discussion off the topic, or follow personal agendas.
 - keeping the meeting lively, positive and moving forward.
 - having adequate breaks, with refreshments if possible.
 - at the end, making sure everyone knows what has been decided, what actions are needed before the next meeting, and what the focus is of the next meeting.
 - distributing minutes/notes to participants in a timely manner, with a reminder of assignments and details of the next meeting.

- ❖ It's important group members understand the goals and objectives of the group as well as their individual roles and capacities in helping accomplish them.
- ❖ Set aside a meeting to discuss expectations, roles and responsibilities of group members so everyone understands what is expected of them.
- ❖ Have the group set realistic achievable goals and actions.
- ❖ Setting goals people feel are important and developing ways to achieve those goals are key to getting people involved and keeping them involved.
- ❖ To identify all the local capacities and resources - human, financial, physical, & community-wide that could be used in your project, conduct an asset mapping activity in your community
- ❖ Develop and/or enhance coalitions among individuals and organizations in the community to provide support for the group's work.
- ❖ Develop linkages outside the community to support the group's work.
- ❖ The action plan for your initiative should meet several criteria. Test yours by asking, "Is the action plan..."
 - **Complete?** Does it list the purpose, scope and all the critical parts/action steps/changes to be sought in all relevant parts of the community (e.g., schools, business, government, faith community)?
 - **Clear?** Is it apparent who will do what by when?
 - **Current?** Does the action plan reflect the current work? Does it anticipate newly-emerging opportunities and barriers?
- ❖ It's very important to recruit, inspire and motivate volunteers effectively to get a job done.
- ❖ Visible change keeps people involved. On long term projects, ensure there are short term achievements that keep volunteers inspired and motivated to continue.
- ❖ Make jobs doable. If a job grows too large, divide the tasks into manageable pieces and distribute the responsibilities among more people.
- ❖ Set time limitations for jobs (other than political) to make activities more attractive and manageable.
- ❖ Make participation accessible for those currently unable to participate by providing transportation, car-pooling or childcare.

- ❖ Develop a community-wide communication network to let everyone know about the group's efforts. Use multiple access points for people to obtain information; newsletters, newspapers, bulletin boards, websites, library, schools.
- ❖ Make information appropriate and of interest to the audience. Ensure information is distributed in a timely fashion so people may use it more effectively.
- ❖ Always communicate positively about volunteers and their activities if you expect others to show interest.
- ❖ Encourage frequent celebration of accomplishments in the project. Celebrate small as well as big successes. They don't have to be elaborate or expensive

Resources:

Building Communities from the Grassroots - Community Development Academy, University of Missouri. The Community Tool Box, Kansas State University, (<http://ctb.lsi.ukans.edu/tools/>)

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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.

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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/>)

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Ideas for Action

The following is an example of a project development plan.

1. Define the Project Vision
 - Give it a name; call it something to make it real.
 - Identify the key players to connect to the project and create a map of all the community resources.

2. Set Purpose, Goals and Outcomes
 - What is the purpose of the project?
 - What is the current situation the project addresses?
 - What are the FACTS behind the existing situation?
 - What are the project goals?
 - What do you want the outcomes to be?
 - Are they measurable, qualitatively and quantitatively?
 - Are they in line with community or organizational goals?
 - Create a project description.

3. Create the Overall Scope and Plan of Action
 - Create a picture of the project, a snapshot so people can picture it.
 - What do you need to do? What is the heart of the work? What activities will support the goals and outcomes?
 - What is/are the process/steps to reaching the goals and outcomes?

4. People the Project
 - Define the tasks and assign people to working groups and/or committees according to their interests.
 - Who are you recruiting to lead and to support the project? How are you going to recruit them?

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- How are you involving all the different parts of the community - neighborhood organizations, civic organizations, officials, youth, parents, local businesses?
 - What skills do you need? Who might you learn these from? Develop a training plan.
5. Timelines
- Every task gets a deadline (by when?) Be realistic when setting these.
 - Work backwards from the end result to build a reasonable timeline.
 - Pull out your calendars, mark down all deadlines. Put a big calendar in full view.
 - Integrate appropriate community or organizational calendars and events. Map out a schedule.
6. Identify Obstacles and Plan for Them
- Create a project cheat sheet, including project people, phone numbers, emergency plan, etc.
 - What is the communication plan? What needs to be communicated? By whom/to whom? How will it be communicated?
 - Identify potential trouble spots and intervention, " If this..then this.."
7. Budget the Project
- Identify total costs for the project and who is responsible.
 - Identify and follow through on resources and in-kind donations (definite and possible).
8. Plan the Evaluation Process
- Identify what needs to be measured and methods of evaluation.
 - Develop a plan to build reflection into the project in order to learn from it.
 - Close the evaluation loop. Take steps to actively follow up on the results of the evaluation/reflection.
9. Integrity and Celebration
- What are the last steps? Have you tied up all loose ends?
 - What closure will you provide for participants and ourselves?
 - How will you celebrate the project?
 - Have we formally thanked and acknowledged everyone contributing to the

project?

- If the project ends with a culmination day, what is the purpose of the event, how are the project goals and message communicated?

10. Leaving a Legacy

- Be a trustee. Develop a plan to ensure sustainability. How will the project be carried on?
- Wrap up final documentation collected and built throughout the project, synthesize, add final lessons learned and suggestions for next steps.

Resources:

Adapted from The Project Development Plan...a 10 Step Community Service Learning Tool, City Year Boston.