



A series for people working together in groups

Choosing Your Group's Structure, Mission, and Goals

Viviane Simon-Brown

This publication contains some of the best-kept secrets for creating and sustaining successful citizen groups. Being clear about your group's organizational structure, roles, responsibilities, mission, and goals can make a big difference in how successful your group is.

Organizational structure means the pattern of relationships within the group. It may include hierarchy (who's in charge) and roles and responsibilities (who does what), but it also incorporates people's attitudes and perceptions, the quality of what is produced, the way decisions are made, and hundreds of other factors. The most effective structures are built out of conscious choices. They frame how we do business.

Few citizen groups spend time on this subject at first. They're too busy working on their project and getting things organized. But sooner or later, the initial excitement wears off, and the bothersome little details take on immense importance.

If your group is just starting, use this publication and EC 1506, *Creating Successful Partnerships*, to help you form its basic framework. If your group has been in existence for quite awhile, it's not too late to step back and reassess your structure and mission.

Being clear about your mission also is important. Many groups have trouble identifying their mission. And if two of you from the same group don't say the same thing, the problem is even worse.

☀ IN THIS PUBLICATION YOU'LL LEARN:

- Why organizational structure is important
- The characteristics of six typical organizational structures in America (and why it's important to understand them)
- How to be clear about your group's vision, mission, and goals
- The roles and responsibilities of all of the players in your group
- What to do when things go wrong (or right)



ABOUT THIS SERIES

“In no country in the world has the principle of association been more successfully used, or applied to a greater multitude of objects, than in America.”

Alexis de Tocqueville
Democracy in America

De Tocqueville wrote this observation in 1831. Some things haven't changed.

We all belong to groups. De Tocqueville called them “associations,” but yours could be a council, committee, commission, delegation, alliance, club, lodge, union, partnership, organization, or coalition. It could be voluntary or professional, advisory or governing, official or casual.

Whatever it's called, and however it's configured, a group is made up of people working together on what's important to them. The publications in this series (see page 16 for a list) are designed to help members of a group be more effective. Do they work? We think so. After all, we work together in groups too.

WHY IS ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE IMPORTANT?

Many organizational problems arise when: (1) the group didn't choose an organizational structure in the first place, or (2) they mixed and matched components from different structures.

Designing a flexible, informal matrix-type organization and then using Robert's Rules of Order, for example, creates confusion. It's like wearing a wool hat, mittens, and a down parka with shorts and sandals. They're all clothing and they all can be effective in the right season, but together they just don't do the job!

As you read about various types of organizational structure in this publication, step back and look at your group. Which model does it fit? Many citizen or voluntary groups use parts of Model 4 (matrix), Model 5 (project organization), and Model 6 (organic). They also use Robert's Rules of Order and consensus decision making in the same meetings.

Acknowledging what you have now is the first step. The next, more important, step is to answer: “What would we like our organizational structure to be 18 months from now?” The third step is to identify what actions your group is willing to take to get there.

Ask yourselves this question: “Is our group a *governing* group, determining direction (goals), focusing on long-term outcomes, and legally responsible for our decisions? Or, is it *advisory*, meaning we can recommend, suggest, and advise, but have no legal authority?”

County commissions are examples of governing groups; so are boards of directors for nonprofit organizations. Jack Ward Thomas' Blue Ribbon panel, which analyzed the spotted owl issue a few years ago, was an advisory committee. It gave its opinions to a decision-making body, which chose to implement most of the recommendations in the report. Most citizen and community action committees do the same thing.

If you aren't sure which category your group fits, don't make another move until you talk it over. You may have major problems later if the group's intent isn't clear.

TYPES OF ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

Gareth Morgan, an authority on organizational theory, wrote: “An organization’s structure strongly affects its ability to handle change. Though organizations can and do evolve, the transformation process is extremely difficult—and the required change is more than structural—it’s cultural and political as well” (*Creative Organizational Theory*).

The following six models are typical organizational structures in the United States. Each works effectively in particular situations; each has disadvantages. It’s easy to dismiss the more traditional structures as archaic. But when your house is on fire, you want a fire department with a clear chain of command and a plan for every contingency, not one trying to decide by consensus what to do next!

Model 1—The rigid organization

Fire departments and the military are obvious examples of rigid organizational structure. If you watch the Star Trek series, you’ll recognize the Klingons as consummate rigid organizationalists.

This structure is organized for stability, and its focus is on maintaining the system. Even the terminology comes from military culture—battle readiness, moving up through the ranks, chain of command. Decisions generally are made by the top people, with rank-and-file members implementing rules, laws, and regulations that they don’t have authority to change (Figure 1).

This organizational structure depends on two factors for success—strict control and an environment that is ultra-stable. Its nemesis is change. Contingencies are planned for; there are few or preferably no surprises. Moving quickly to handle never-before-encountered situations is almost impossible.

Model 2—Senior management team

This model is similar to the first. It requires a stable environment. Standardization is important. In this kind of organization, you hear people say things such as, “Did you submit your request on an SF153-G form?”

This model does expand authority for policy decisions to a senior management team. If there is disagreement on an issue, the decision is put to a vote using Robert’s Rules of Order, and the majority

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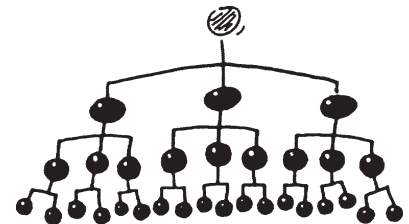


Figure 1.—The rigid organization.

- Environment is ultra-stable
- Organized for stability
- Focus is on maintaining systems
- Strict control
- Every contingency is planned for
- Slow and ineffective in dealing with change
- Either majority vote or no vote

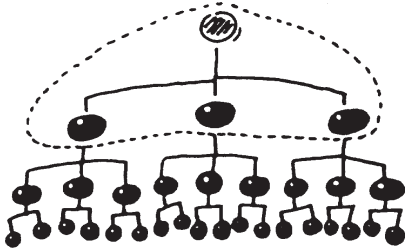


Figure 2.—Senior management team.

- Environment is stable with some new problems
- Organized for stability
- Focus is on maintaining systems
- Management team makes all policy decisions
- Clearly defined authority
- Prefer standardization and key operating principles
- Majority vote

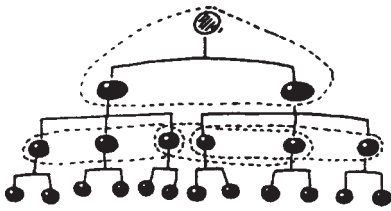


Figure 3.—Project team and task force.

- Environment is changing rapidly
- Organized for handling specific problems
- Focus is on improving systems
- Uses interorganizational project teams and task forces
- Strong sense of traditional hierarchy
- Primary loyalty to own organization
- Problems are delegated upward
- Team members have little power
- Majority vote

wins. In this kind of organization, everyone knows what his or her job is and isn't. Authority is clearly defined by a chain of command (Figure 2).

The biggest corporate conglomerates of the 1950s and 1960s exemplified this model. Banks and some federal agencies still use it today. The major disadvantages are the inherent inability to change and the lack of recognition of the decision-making abilities of employees.

Model 3—Project team and task force

The project team and task force model was developed as a way to respond to major change. Its official beginning was the Manhattan Project, in which government and private industry scientists joined forces in the early 1940s to develop the atom bomb. The focus changed from maintaining existing systems to improving them to handle new and specific problems.

In this model, teams of people from different organizations work together toward a specific goal (Figure 3). While Robert's Rules of Order are not as rigorously enforced as in the senior management team model, majority voting is the norm. Since this model derives from models 1 and 2, it carries their cultural values.

Although widely used today—United Way's Loaned Executive program is a prime example—this model has several disadvantages. Participants maintain their primary loyalty to their own sponsoring organizations. Since their paychecks still come from their employers, they know their priorities. Generally, the team members have a lot of expertise but little real power. Problems are delegated upward through the chain of command.

Model 4—The matrix organization

This model looks different! The matrix organization model is organized for flexibility and change, and it acknowledges that the environment is changing rapidly. Its focus is on the end product (Figure 4). This organizational structure encourages flexible, innovative, and adaptive behaviors. It diffuses influence and control, with an informal method of coordination. Most decision making is by consensus. Ted Gaebler, coauthor of *Reinventing Government*, states that most of America's companies will use this model by 2005.

The disadvantages are that the boundaries of responsibilities are less clear, and there are more people to connect with. And achieving real consensus takes time.

Land's End catalog company is an excellent example of a matrix organization. Its employee teams determine direction and goals, and have authority as well as responsibility to solve problems creatively.

Model 5—The project organization

When Boeing wanted to build the 777-model passenger jet, it selected a team, gave the team a budget and a nonnegotiable deadline, and said "make it so." The team's job was to create a prototype that flew, and they did. This was true outcome-based work!

In a project organizational structure, teams have free rein within clearly stated, agreed-upon parameters (Figure 5). Allegiance is to the project, not necessarily to the organization. All systems are designed to focus on the end product. Decisions are by consensus. Frequent cross-fertilization of ideas infuses the organization.

On the downside, there is more opportunity for miscommunication in this model simply because there's so much communication going on. It's harder to keep track of the process or to control its outcomes. If you're a control freak, this model might not be for you.

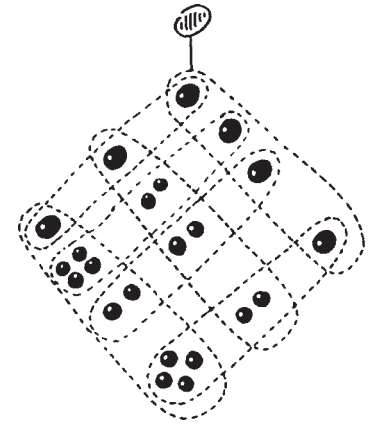


Figure 4.—The matrix organization.

- Environment is changing rapidly
- Organized for flexibility and change
- Focus is on end product
- Meets the demands of special situations
- Encourages flexible, innovative, and adaptive behavior
- Diffuses influence and control
- Coordination is informal
- Decisions by consensus

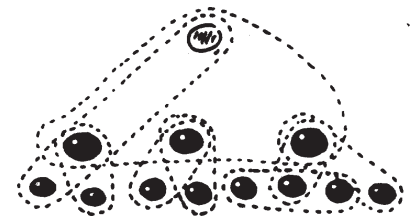


Figure 5.—The project organization.

- Environment is changing rapidly
- Organized for flexibility and change
- Focus is on end product
- Coordination is informal
- Teams have free rein within agreed-upon parameters
- Frequent cross-fertilization of ideas
- Decisions by consensus

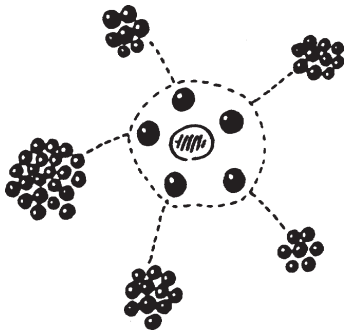


Figure 6.—Organic network.

- *Environment is rapidly changing*
- *Organized for flexibility and change*
- *Core members set a strategic direction and provide operational support*
- *An open-ended system of ideas and activities rather than an entity with a clear structure and definable boundary*
- *Consensus or total agreement*

Model 6—Organic network

This model is more of an open-ended system of ideas and activities than an entity with a clear structure and definable boundary. A core group of members sets a strategic direction, provides operational support, and then steps out of the way as others take over the idea and move it forward (Figure 6).

This model works in community action settings where the intent is to get people involved in making the community a better place to live. It provides the most flexibility and opportunity for spin-off organizations. The grassroots food co-ops of the 1960s epitomized this model.

VISION, MISSION, AND GOALS

Quick, answer this question: “What is our group’s mission?”

If it takes longer than 30 seconds to explain clearly what your group does, you’ve got a problem. And if two of you from the same group don’t say the same thing, the problem is even worse. It’s important to define your vision, mission, and goals *before* you get into the details of who does what. (We’ll discuss roles and responsibilities later in this publication.)

Many groups have trouble identifying their mission. Part of the problem is vocabulary. You probably hear the words “vision,” “mission,” and “goals” all the time. Are you ever confused about which is which, or wonder why it matters? This section will explain these terms.

Vision expresses the ideal future, what life would be like in the best of all possible worlds. Linda Marks, in *Living with Vision*, states, “Vision is the foundation on which we create what really matters for ourselves, for others and for humanity.”

“A world without hunger” is a vision. It’s powerful. You can see it. Is it attainable? Only if many people share the same vision. Is it worth working toward? Absolutely.

Using this definition, your group’s vision is the world you’re striving for. Successful partnerships are supported by commonly shared vision.

Missions are much more practical than visions. What’s the responsibility your organization is willing to shoulder to attain its vision? If a group’s vision is a world without hunger, it has lots of choices for a mission. It could choose to “provide healthy dinners for transients in the community,” “raise funds for overseas famine relief,” or “advocate for the preservation of family farms.”

The environmental, social, and economic issues we face are so overwhelming that most groups try to take on more than they can handle. Keep MinitLube's motto in mind: "Other companies want to change the world. All we want to do is change your oil." Take the time to narrow your focus. Your group will do a better job.

To be successful, all organizations need to articulate their *values* and *operating principles*. They are intertwined, underpinning everything we do (Figure 7). They tell the world who we are and how we go about our business.

We have personal values, such as "I want to be healthy; therefore I choose to not smoke," "I value good education for my children, so I volunteer in their school," or "I have an obligation to help those less fortunate." In our work life, we live with a set of professional values. One of the best known is the physician's Hippocratic Oath (in part, "First, do no harm"), but the rest of us have values too. We also have constitutional values, for example, to obey our nation's laws and to pay taxes. (Values, like consciences, aren't always fun.)

Groups often get into trouble when individuals superimpose their personal values onto the values of the organization, another example of mixing and matching. No matter what your values are about abortion, gun control, old-growth forests, or the myriad other value-laden issues we face, you should be clear about the values you bring to the group, and recognize that your personal values are not the same as the group's values.

Because it's so easy to confuse personal values with group values, it's important to recognize diverse personal values, and to agree on the values your group shares in working toward your mission.

The best organizations define their value systems. These values become the foundation upon which all of their resources are built. Peters and Waterman, in *Search for Excellence*, say it best: ". . .we were asked for one all-purpose bit of advice for management, one truth that we were able to distill from the excellent companies' research. We might be tempted to reply, 'Figure out your value system. Decide what your company stands for. . . .'"

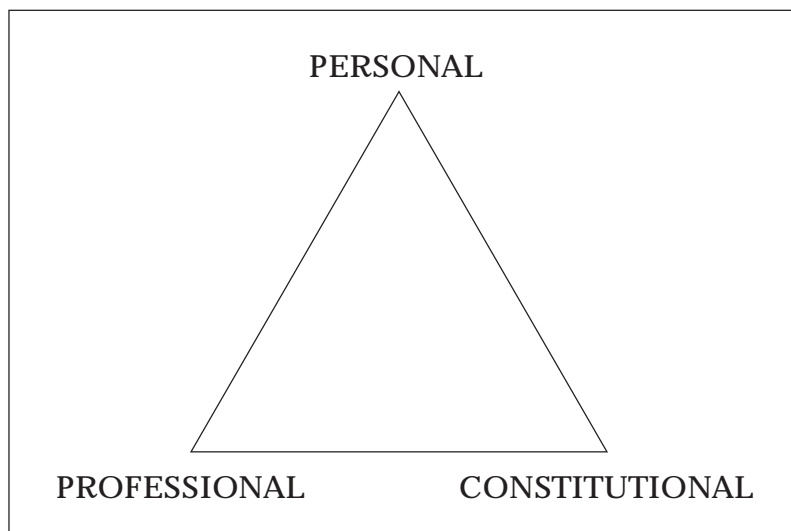


Figure 7.—Our personal, professional, and constitutional values interact to define how we relate to the world.

What does your group stand for? What kind of people are you? Continuing the food example, one value that would greatly affect how the group does business would be: “We believe that everyone deserves a good, hot meal in pleasant surroundings at least once a day.”

Action plans are the goals, objectives, and benchmarks your organization pursues to achieve your mission. Planning must come before action! Consider Abraham Lincoln’s words of wisdom, “If I had an hour to cut down a tree, I’d spend the first 45 minutes sharpening my ax.”



Consider Abraham Lincoln’s words of wisdom, “If I had an hour to cut down a tree, I’d spend the first 45 minutes sharpening my ax.”

Racing to action seems to be a national value. It’s hard for groups to slow down enough to know where they’re going. A good action plan helps you slow down and go in the right direction.

Goals are specific, straightforward statements of expectations. One goal of our food group might be to establish a permanent location for storing and preparing food and serving meals.

Goals can be relatively short-term, for example 1 year, or ongoing, depending on their complexity. The hardest thing about goals is selecting which ones to go for first. And remember, the greatest deterrent to meeting your goals is not having any!

Objectives are specific steps you’ll take to achieve the goal. Sometimes they’re even called actions, but objectives usually are broader than actions. The important thing is that these are tangible steps. To achieve the goal of a permanent location, the food group might agree to “contact other providers to explore purchasing and renovating the old armory.” This is a very focused, specific objective. Objectives often are described as being measurable.

Benchmarks or *outcomes* are measures of success. Our food group might choose the benchmark “have identified three to five potential partners.” When they achieve that benchmark, they can celebrate, check it off the list, and move on to the next task.

Evaluations and *assessments* are ways to measure what your group has accomplished. Let’s hope you have more to show for your efforts than attending meetings! To evaluate your progress, benchmarks come in handy.

Of course, you’ll ask people who are directly involved with your group to assess its efforts, but also make sure to ask people with no direct connection to your activities. For your efforts to succeed, as many people as possible need to support them. Here’s one sure way to know you’re on the right track: If people are clamoring to be on your committee, obviously you’ve got a winner!

Right now, you're either congratulating yourself for being part of an organization that has all of these components firmly in place or backtracking to fill in the gaps. Save time and future headaches: "Go slow to go fast." (You'll learn more about this in EC 1508, *Effective Meetings Management*.)

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Now that we've talked about organizational structure, mission, and goals, let's look at the responsibilities of group members. Regardless of the organizational structure your group uses, each member has two distinct sets of roles and responsibilities—content and process. *Content* roles and responsibilities are **what** you do; *process* roles and responsibilities are **how** you do it.

The following is a general guide to the roles and responsibilities of the participants in groups. After reading this section, you'll see that although roles and responsibilities are divided among group members for convenience, it is the whole group's responsibility to take care of the group. EC 1508 focuses on the process roles in more detail.

A group member:

- Advocates for the group's vision, mission, shared values, and goals (*content*)
- Maintains a holistic perspective (keeping long-range goals in mind while dealing with short-term tasks) to keep all members on track (*content* and *process*)
- Helps create possible solutions (*content* and *process*)
- Is a liaison between interested community citizens and group members (*content* and *process*)
- Arranges adequate time to carry out his or her group responsibilities (*process*)
- Listens to other group members and follows the rules of the group (*process*)
- Participates in group discussion and decision making (*content* and *process*)
- Serves on standing committees and appropriate ad hoc committees (*process*)

Your group may choose to have an Executive Committee, which:

- Includes two or three group members who can devote additional time to the group's work (*process*)
- Is more big-picture oriented (*content*)
- Reports back regularly to the full group (*content*)
- Suggests items for consideration by the full group (*content*)
- Ensures that it is not considered by outsiders as "THE group" (*content*)

Group chair

Nowadays, letting go of old assumptions is the hardest part of being the Chairperson. We all remember when the chairman "ran" the meeting, called for reports, kept everyone on task, made the decisions, and basically told group members what to do. The old job description for Chairman mixed content and process roles, combining the "what you do" with "how to do it."

But the assumption that group members share the responsibility for creating successful meetings eliminates the need for this duality. In fact, one of the biggest deterrents to group success can be a Chair who isn't able to relinquish the process role.

So, what does an enlightened Chair do? In addition to *all the responsibilities of a group member*, an effective Chair does the following.

Before the meeting:

- Works hand-in-hand with the meeting manager to prepare and organize the meeting agenda.

During the meeting:

- Focuses on the *content*, ensuring that everything the group does moves the group closer to its goals.
- Embodies facilitative leadership.

Between meetings:

- Channels communications between staff/committees/members.
- Represents the group to the outside world.

Standing or long-term committee members:

- Focus on the steps needed to achieve a specific goal (*content and process*)
- Become informed about the overall process and content concerns of the group (*content and process*)
- Advocate for the group's vision, mission, shared values, and goals (*content*)
- Maintain a holistic perspective to keep members on track (*content*)
- Share useful committee information with the full group (*process*)

Ad hoc or short-term committees:

- Work on specific issues (ranging from one special event to setting up a complex collaboration with another group) (*content*)
- Include all affected constituencies (*process*)
- Have one member who acts as liaison to the full group (*process*)
- Are aware of what the whole group is trying to accomplish (*content*)

Some groups are fortunate enough to have staff. Staff:

- Manage the day-to-day operations in such a way that the group's goals are achieved
 - Perform all tasks delegated by the group
 - Keep group members informed by:
 - Prioritizing and highlighting important things to know
 - Providing background information as requested
 - Providing objective analysis and recommendations on issues
 - Offer technical assistance and logistical support
 - Keep in close contact with colleagues in other agencies and organizations
 - Take the lead in monitoring programs to determine their effectiveness
 - Work together in a supportive and professional environment
- If your group doesn't have staff, these responsibilities are shared by group members, often at the Executive Committee level.

Who should not be in your group?

As you can see, every member of your group has important roles and responsibilities. Thus, a person who has no role to play shouldn't be a member of your group. Without a clearly defined role, a person isn't responsible for the success of the group. Neither do you want someone who is unwilling to play by the group's ground rules, or who sabotages group decisions. (For more information on ground rules, read EC 1508, *Effective Meetings Management*.)

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

Every group goes sideways. While it would be nice to go from Point A to Point B in a straight line, that rarely happens. Generally, a mix of forward progress and detours can be expected. Consider how many times those "detours" actually get you to where you need to be.

The things that go wrong usually involve people problems or organizational difficulties. EC 1511, *Dealing with Stumbling Blocks*, discusses some common stumbling blocks that partnerships often face, and suggests some ways to avoid or overcome them. While the do-it-yourself approach works most of the time for community groups, when your group is in real crisis, it's time for an outside facilitator to help you refocus.

A group member could ask the same questions a facilitator would (What's our mission? What are our operating principles? What are the difficulties we face? How can they be surmounted?), but an outsider is neutral, which makes all the difference in the world. The peace of mind a facilitator can bring is worth the investment. Sources for good facilitators are listed in the Resources section of this publication.

WHEN THINGS GO RIGHT

It's so easy to focus on the negative that we have to make a conscious effort to celebrate the positive. People who have accomplished great things often say that at some point they were so discouraged that they were ready to give up, when, all of a sudden, they experienced one small, positive result that encouraged them to continue their efforts. Your group needs the same incentives. Take time to notice and cheer!

SUMMARY/SELF REVIEW

The following checklist will remind you of the key points in this publication and will help you see where your group may need to do some work on its organizational structure, mission, and goals.

- Do you know what your group's current organizational structure is?
- What would you like it to be 18 months from now?
- Is your group governing or advisory? What entity makes the final decision on your recommendations?
- What is your group trying to accomplish? (All members should be able to answer this question in 30 seconds or less.)
- Are the definitions and differences between vision, mission, values and operating principles, goals, objectives, and benchmarks clear to you?
- Can you identify some of your group's values, some beliefs that everyone in your group would agree with?
- Do you know the role you play and your responsibilities in your group?
- Does your group need an outside facilitator to help it move forward?
- Does your group celebrate its successes?

EXERCISES

Visioning

Think of a group you belong to. This exercise will help your group quickly develop a working framework of vision, mission, values, and goals. It begins with individuals, who then “compare notes” in small groups, which bring the results to the full group.

1. *15 minutes:* First, ask each person to think about what the organization is and what it is trying to accomplish. Then, imagine an event 5 years in the future. Your organization is receiving an award for innovative, outstanding work. You are at the podium to receive the award on behalf of your group. The master of ceremonies is reading the citation right now. You are listening intently, leaning slightly forward, focused on his every word. What is he saying about your group's accomplishments? Write it down.
2. *30 minutes:* Get together with a group of three to five people. Ask each person to read his or her citation. After listening to each other, record the major points on flipchart paper. Also, write down individual value-laden adjectives and nouns such as “innovative,” “stewardship,” and “comprehensive.”

continued

EXERCISES (continued)

3. *60 minutes*: Now, hand all of the flipcharts to a committee of two or three people who really like to wordsmith. The committee's job is to use the words and phrases on the flipcharts to draft vision, mission, values, and goals statements for the group.

This task isn't as difficult as it sounds. Use the definitions found earlier in this chapter. Vision phrases will have an idealistic "apple pie and motherhood" sound. Mission and goal statements may look similar at first, but missions are bigger and more encompassing than goals. Value-laden words can be developed into operating principle statements. One of the most famous operating principles of all time is: "We hold these truths to be self-evident. All men are created equal." Starting your statements with "We believe. . ." can help. Don't agonize over this process.

4. After you've drafted reasonably good statements, put them on flipcharts and post them at the next meeting. Ask group members to write their comments on post-it notes and stick them on the charts. Tell them you welcome positive comments as well as suggestions for improvements. You'll notice this technique prevents the deadly "everybody's an editor" syndrome.
5. Now rework the statements, incorporating the suggestions as much as possible. The only trick to this job is to make sure you use the actual words and sentiments of the people who made suggestions, not just your own.
6. Now take the "new, improved" statements (on flipcharts) back to the group. Ask them to adopt them for a year. Remind them that you've merely wordsmithed what they wrote down. Almost universally, groups will accept the statements on a trial basis for a limited amount of time.

If the worst happens, and several people are adamantly opposed to the statements, suggest that since your committee has accomplished its task, you will hand over all of the working flipcharts to them. Encourage them to create their own draft for approval by the full group. Request a similar timeline. Guaranteed, this technique works!

Desired characteristics for group members

This short exercise will help your group easily identify the desired characteristics for new members.

1. First, when the whole group is together, ask each person to write on a post-it note the one, most important characteristic a group member should have.
2. Collect the post-its and give them to a committee of wordsmiths (a different group than the ones who worked on the first exercise). This committee will take about 30 minutes to draft the characteristics into "desired qualifications" statements. If the committee gets stuck, they can modify the Marines' slogan, "We're looking for a few good people who. . . ." Use these qualifications when recruiting new group members.

RESOURCES

Training

The *OSU Extension Family Community Leadership program* at Oregon State University has excellent publications and training opportunities—often free or for a nominal charge—in many Oregon counties. Contact your county office of the OSU Extension Service for details.

The *Chandler Center for Community Leadership*, a partnership of the OSU Extension Service, Central Oregon Community College, and the Chandler Center, can provide training and experienced facilitators. They are located at 2600 NW College Way, Bend, OR 97701; phone: 541-388-8361; fax: 541-383-8002.

Information

The Art of the Long View, by P. Schwartz (SAGE Publications, Newbury Park, CA, 1996). ISBN 0-385-26732-0

Creative Organizational Theory, by G. Morgan (SAGE Publications, Newbury Park, CA, 1989). ISBN 0-8039-3438-6

Images of Organization, by G. Morgan (SAGE Publications, Newbury Park, CA, 1986). ISBN 0-8039-2831-9

MOVING FORWARD—THE NEXT STEPS

On your own, use the lines below to fill in steps, actions, thoughts, contacts, etc. you'll take to move yourself and your group ahead in determining and evaluating your organizational structure, roles and responsibilities, vision, mission, and goals.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____



OTHER PUBLICATIONS IN THIS SERIES

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