Community groups often are made up of people with a wide variety of backgrounds and interests. The open membership of voluntary groups makes them less internally similar than other groups such as church groups, industry organizations, environmental groups, or service groups. Whatever the composition of your group, your members share a common interest. These bonds of common interest are the heart of a partnership.

This is the first publication in a series called “Working Together.” It highlights some of the unique aspects of voluntary groups and points out how they can be formed and sustained over time. This publication will provide you with a basic understanding of partnerships. Other publications in this series build on this understanding and are full of tips and skill-building exercises for increasing group effectiveness.

In this series, we’ll speak as if you were starting a partnership from scratch. In practice, most groups already are involved in partnerships. That’s OK; you’ll still find lots of ideas here to help you.

Successful Partnerships

P. Corcoran

In this publication you’ll learn:

- What a partnership is and the value of working together
- Characteristics of successful, and less successful, partnerships
- Key elements to consider when forming and sustaining your partnership
- The importance of a shared vision and measurable goals

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Successful Partnerships

“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 con-figured, a group is made up of people working together on what’s important to them. The publications in this series (see page 12 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.

WHAT IS A PARTNERSHIP?

A partnership is a public agreement among a group of people to work together for a common interest. A partnership implies a willingness to collaborate with others to reach common goals, without giving up your own identity or personal interests. For voluntary groups, it means a good-faith attempt to work together to achieve your desired outcomes. It means finding a way to tolerate people you might not like but agree to work with. It’s an acknowledgment that cooperation may be the best strategy for getting things done.

Partnership members agree to set and follow certain guidelines in order to work together successfully. All groups, especially diverse groups, experience a certain level of frustration. However, people who share a common interest and goodwill—people in partnerships—spend less time and energy fighting each other and more time and energy tackling problems.

WHY WORK TOGETHER?

No one person can know everything. Partnerships add value to community efforts by drawing on the expertise of a variety of people who know an issue from different perspectives. Partnerships operate with the understanding that everyone has a piece of the truth. It often takes awhile to find out what each person’s piece of the truth is, but with effort the pieces fall into place. Involving a wide variety of people also multiplies the group’s creativity since a wider variety of solutions can be generated.

The nature of voluntary groups—where people contribute because they want to, not because they have to—means people must choose to roll up their sleeves and implement projects. A key concept in the management of volunteers is that of ownership. If people are involved in selecting a project, they’re more likely to have ownership of the project and are more likely to help implement it.

Furthermore, broad local involvement increases the likelihood that projects will be accepted and supported over the long haul. This support is critical given the time sometimes needed to show results. Skillfully maintained partnerships increase citizens’ personal sense of responsibility, involvement, and commitment.
CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS

Given the great variety of partnerships, it helps to know what distinguishes a successful partnership from an unsuccessful one. As you look at the following list, you may think, “Our group doesn’t have these characteristics, so we can’t be a successful partnership.” Keep in mind, however, that we all operate under less-than-ideal circumstances. Your group can succeed as long as you identify what you need to do to improve the partnership. It takes effort.

The following characteristics of successful partnerships are adapted from the Partnership Handbook (1995) by Ann Moote:

■ Broad membership—A common guideline for partnerships is to involve everyone. Typical partners in voluntary groups include government agencies, nonprofit organizations, professional societies, corporations, landowners, and private citizens.

■ Local knowledge—Partnerships enhance the success of group efforts by drawing on the expertise of a wide range of individuals and groups who live in and intimately know the local conditions.

■ Effective communication—Partnerships use communication to solve problems and reach agreements. Effective communication improves everyone’s understanding of the issues and of each other’s needs and concerns, thereby reducing conflict. See EC 1510, Effective Communication, for hints on how to improve your group’s communication.

■ Common vision—By generating a commonly shared vision, partnerships build long-term support that can improve project implementation. For voluntary groups, this vision relates to the future of local communities. EC 1507, Choosing Your Group’s Structure, Mission, and Goals, talks more about this topic.

■ Collaborative decision making—Decisions usually are made by consensus to ensure that everyone’s needs and concerns are addressed. In this way, partnership groups often come up with more creative and generally acceptable decisions than they would if only a few people were involved in making decisions. See EC 1509, Good Decision Making, for more information.

■ Pooled resources—Partnerships improve on-the-ground results by pooling resources of several organizations, agencies, and individuals. Pooling resources provides various benefits, including a broader commitment to the outcome, access to a wider variety of volunteers, and a real sense of “being in this together.”
CHARACTERISTICS OF UNSUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS

You also can learn from unsuccessful partnerships. Again, seeing characteristics of your group on this list doesn’t mean you’re doomed to failure. It does mean that you’ll need to bring up these issues and address them openly and honestly in order to resolve them. (See EC 1510, Effective Communication Skills, and EC 1511, Dealing with Stumbling Blocks.) Here are some characteristics of unsuccessful partnerships (also from the Partnership Handbook):

- Conflict among key interests remains unresolved.
- The group has no clear purpose.
- Goals or deadlines are unrealistic.
- Key interests or decision makers aren’t included or refuse to participate.
- Not all participants stand to benefit from the partnership.
- Some members stand to benefit considerably more than others.
- Some members have more power than others.
- The partnership isn’t needed because one entity could achieve the goals alone.
- Financial and time commitments outweigh potential benefits.
- Members are uncomfortable with the commitments required.
- Constitutional issues or legal precedents constrain the partnership.

KEY ELEMENTS IN FORMING AND SUSTAINING SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships are relationships, and all relationships require effort to sustain openness and effective communication. Relationships don’t just happen; you have to work at them.

Sustaining partnerships requires basic relationship skills and more. By looking at Moote’s lists, we can conclude that successful partnerships have three key ingredients—collective involvement, shared vision, and measurable goals. Conversely, partnerships aren’t successful when membership is rigged or one-sided, members don’t actively seek common ground, or goals are fuzzy. Let’s look at each of these factors more closely.
Collective involvement

Successful groups require voluntary involvement. People contributing their time and good will are rewarded when their contribution can be made with some choice and with varying levels of involvement. There is plenty of work for anyone interested, but it takes effort to synchronize each contribution in a way that supports the goals of the group.

There is a tendency to want to have a small group of decision makers tell a large group of workers what to do. This approach is efficient from a manager’s perspective, but it seldom works with volunteers. You can’t expect people to volunteer to implement ideas that they haven’t been part of developing. In keeping with the adage “go slow to go fast,” it’s important to involve as many future implementers as possible right from the beginning.

If you’re just starting a group, you will need to identify potential participants. In addition to the typical folks likely to be involved in your group, think about people who can interpret the various systems involved in the issue (for example, ecological systems, economic systems, community and political systems).

Also consider some important “types” of participants. They may be from any field but have certain characteristics that serve the group. Examples include champions, sponsors, catalysts, doers, and youth. Champions choose issues that are personally meaningful. They are willing to do battle for the collective interests of the group. Sponsors provide direct support to the group. They advocate, promote, assist, and further the goals of the group in many ways. Catalysts are initiators and prodders. They make things happen by their energy, integrity, and the force of their will. Doers get things done. They often work behind the scenes and are the backbone of any volunteer group.

Youth can be a phenomenal asset to your group. Young people have a fresh view of the world, lots of energy and ideas, and a huge stake in the outcomes of the group. Youth activities are a large component of family and community life. Youth involved in your issue can extend commitment throughout the community.

At some point, you’ll need to generate a list of all people interested in or affected by the issues in your area. Who could be affected (both positively and negatively) by decisions of the group? Add these names to your list. When contacting potential participants, ask them...
to identify other people they think should be invited to participate. It often is easier to get people involved when they know they’ve been referred by someone they trust.

As your group develops, continuously monitor group participation. Ask yourselves which new groups or individuals might be recruited into the partnership. Remember, stakeholders who are excluded from participation sometimes undermine the collective effort.

Encouraging participation

Getting all potentially affected groups and individuals to participate requires more than simply announcing meetings. You’ll need to use every form of communication and education available. Some tips (from the Partnership Handbook) include:

- Use the media both to announce ongoing events and to publicize special activities.
- Use peer-to-peer networking. Have members call or visit neighbors, colleagues, and others who may have an interest in or be affected by your group’s activities.
- Use field or site visits to make the issues tangible and build enthusiasm.
- Use newsletters and brochures to advertise your partnership’s efforts.
- Work through local schools to educate the public about partnership goals and activities.
- Consider innovative outreach methods such as photography, music, art, dance, and theater to publicize the partnership.

Rarely will all of the people your group needs step up and volunteer for your partnership. In order to encourage broad participation, try appealing to people’s sense of stewardship, citizenship, and service. Demonstrate how the problem you’re addressing affects different groups and how each person can make a unique contribution to the solution.

Maintaining participation

Participant burnout is a common problem in partnership groups. Use the following tips (from the Partnership Handbook) to motivate participants and maintain enthusiasm:

- Start with small, manageable projects that are likely to be successful.
• Document and celebrate success.
• Use on-the-ground projects to give participants a sense that they are making a difference.
• Use positive feedback, recognition, and rewards as incentives for continued participation.
• Maintain a stable structure to reassure members that the partnership is accountable to them, and that something will get done.
• Offer opportunities to participate at different levels (regularly, occasionally, professionally, etc.).
• Build on sources of community pride.
• Make explicit what member organizations and individuals stand to gain; identify specific benefits.
• Demonstrate that these benefits will offset any loss of autonomy participants might experience.
• Continually revisit and stress successes and achievements.
• Make it fun—for example, provide refreshments at meetings, or plan social events.

Shared vision

The most important element of any partnership with diverse membership is its shared vision—the basic reason why the group has formed. When times get frustrating, the vision serves as a positive affirmation of the group’s hopes.

It’s easy to forget the common vision during moments of controversy. During conflict, members often identify with the organization they represent rather than with the partnership. The vision can remind people of their common values and bring the conversation back to a more productive tone.

It’s important for your group to revisit its vision during times of relative calm. Annual group exercises that restate common interests and update the group’s vision statement are a good idea. Some groups find it useful to incorporate their vision statement into their letterhead and group mailings.

See EC 1507, Choosing Your Group’s Structure, Mission, and Goals, for more on visioning.
Successful Partnerships

■ Partnerships are a particular form of organization. Partners often have very different views of problems and the solutions required to address them.

■ Partnership members need to keep focused on areas of agreement and build upon those areas.

■ To be successful, members need to regularly reaffirm their common vision, interests, and goals.

■ Additionally, successful partnerships exhibit several characteristics. Consider whether your group has the following:
  • A common vision
  • Broad membership
  • Ample local knowledge
  • An effective means of communication
  • A collaborative process for making decisions
  • A knack for pooling resources

■ Ultimately, the success of your group will be determined by what happens on the ground. The real-world outcomes of the partnership will result from a compelling common vision, supported by clear measurable steps that allow everyone to contribute to the vision in the best way they can.

Measurable goals

Your partnership will need to document and communicate its progress. Establishing clear goals and objectives makes it easier to measure progress toward them.

Goal-setting typically occurs after a group articulates its vision, which sets the context for subsequent goals and objectives. While there is one vision, there can be several goals, many objectives, and scores of tasks. The language used to identify goals, objectives, and tasks must be increasingly specific. The more specifically stated the objective, the easier it is to measure whether you’re making progress toward it.

SUMMARY/SELF REVIEW

❑ Partnerships are a particular form of organization. Partners often have very different views of problems and the solutions required to address them.

❑ Partnership members need to keep focused on areas of agreement and build upon those areas.

❑ To be successful, members need to regularly reaffirm their common vision, interests, and goals.

❑ Additionally, successful partnerships exhibit several characteristics. Consider whether your group has the following:
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❑ Ultimately, the success of your group will be determined by what happens on the ground. The real-world outcomes of the partnership will result from a compelling common vision, supported by clear measurable steps that allow everyone to contribute to the vision in the best way they can.
**EXERCISE**

The following exercise will help you check how well your voluntary group compares to the ideal partnership. You can do this exercise on your own or as a group discussion.

1. Reflect on your experience with other, more homogenous, groups (for example, a commodity group, agency, or environmental group). Compare that experience with your experience in this group and answer the following questions:
   - How does a diverse partnership make participation in the group more difficult?
   - What outcomes can a diverse partnership achieve that can’t be achieved by a homogenous group?

2. Next, evaluate your voluntary group in terms of the ideals for a successful partnership:
   - How does it currently measure up to the goal of collective involvement?
   - How often do you review and articulate your common vision?
   - Could an outsider to your group look at the stated goals and objectives and see how they will be measured?

**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.

University Associates offers a variety of training programs on group process and organizational development. They can be contacted at 3505 North Campbell Ave., Suite 505, Tucson, AZ 85719; phone: 520-322-6700; fax: 520-322-6789; email: info@universityassociates.com; Web: www.universityassociates.com

Christopher Roach, Dialogue Dynamics, is a Corvallis-based trainer who has expertise on this subject. He can be contacted at 966 NW Sequoia, Corvallis, OR 97330; phone: 541-754-5521.

### Information

Collaboration Framework (The National Network for Collaboration, Fargo, ND). Phone: 701-231-7259; email: nncoinfo@mes.umn.edu; Web: http://www.cyfernet.mes.umn.edu:2400


**The Conservation Technology Information Center (CTIC) materials**

The Conservation Technology Information Center (CTIC) at Purdue University has a great selection of materials, which are listed below. Many of these materials can be reviewed on the Web at [www.ctic.purdue.edu/catalog/WatershedManagement.html#GUIDES](http://www.ctic.purdue.edu/catalog/WatershedManagement.html#GUIDES)

The address and phone number for ordering CTIC material is:

The Conservation Technology Information Center  
1220 Potter Drive, Rm. 170  
West Lafayette, IN 47906  
Phone: 317-494-9555; fax: 317-494-5969

Building Local Partnerships: A Guide for Watershed Partnerships. Booklet with good sections on identifying and involving partners, communication, teamwork, and building consensus. 10 pages. $2

Building Local Partnerships Guide. Describes who should be involved and what they can bring to the group. 12 pages. $2

Farmer-led Watershed Initiatives Conference Proceedings. Manual includes case studies of five farmer-led watershed initiatives (Heron Lake, MN; North Fork Ninnescah/Cheney Reservoir, KS; Embarras River Basin, IL; Otter Lake, IL; Catskill-Delaware Watershed Complex, NY). Also includes brief descriptions of presentations on farming practices and innovative management practices. 32 pages. $5

Leading and Communicating: A Guide for Watershed Partnerships. Booklet covering listening, discussion, brainstorming, and other communication skills. 6 pages. $2

Leading and Communicating Guide. Describes the skills needed (and serves to refresh your skills) to facilitate a diverse partnership of stakeholders. 8 pages. $2


Managing Conflict Guide. Describes how you can turn conflict into a healthy discussion resulting in viable ideas. 8 pages. $2
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 strengthening your partnership.

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OTHER PUBLICATIONS IN THIS SERIES

Choosing an Organizational Structure, Mission, and Goals, EC 1507, by Viviane Simon-Brown (April 1999). $2.00
Dealing with Stumbling Blocks, EC 1511, by Flaxen D.L. Conway (April 1999). $2.00
Decision Making, EC 1509, by Pat Corcoran (April 1999). $2.00
Effective Meetings Management, EC 1508, by Viviane Simon-Brown (April 1999). $2.00
Effective Communicaton, EC 1510, by Flaxen Conway (April 1999). $2.00

To order copies of the above publications, or additional copies of this publication, send the complete title and series number, along with a check or money order for the amount listed (payable to Oregon State University), to:
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Fax: 541-737-0817

We offer discounts on orders of 100 or more copies of a single title. Please call 541-737-2513 for price quotes.
You can access our Publications and Videos catalog as well as these publications and many others through our Web page at eesc.orst.edu

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Published April 1999.