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NC Conservation Network

Tip Sheet #5: Making cooperative efforts work

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Making cooperative efforts work

There are volumes written about group behavior that most activist leaders don't have the time or inclination to slug through. So we've boiled them down in this Tip Sheet to seven of the most important tips we believe particularly apply to cooperative efforts – groups of groups – no matter the structure of your effort.

Tip #1: Relationships between group members come first.

Only when individuals in a group create a feeling of trust, safety, and awareness of who is in the room and why, can the group move on to accomplish the task at hand. It's then that individual or organizational needs begin to be less emphasized in the interest of the collective group. We've seen lots of cooperative efforts launch right into defining vision, goals, and a plan of action before participants feel comfortable, often resulting in conflict and disagreement.

Tip #2: To Go Fast, It Helps to Go Slow.

Slow down the inclination to jump immediately into planning the work and assigning responsibilities. Take time to ensure that individuals are comfortable and acquainted with each other and to develop a common understanding of the opportunity and/or problem at hand. Articulating differences is essential at this juncture. With a common understanding, the group can move to planning action that has true group ownership.

Tip #3: Pay attention to the tension between what the full group may need and individual participants want.

Wants and needs of the participating groups and individuals may differ. Honestly and clearly stating your organization's needs and wants and identifying the places where these do and don't coincide will be very helpful. Organizations find they must give something up, such as full credit, media presence, control over strategy, etc., to create something greater.

Tip #4: Power dynamics are always present.

Different groups have different power dynamics and relationships. People and organizations will naturally vie for power and recognition. We recommend that you name it, claim it, and develop systems to manage power well at each phase of the group's development.

Tip #5: Every group develops a culture.

Be intentional about the culture you would like to create and model behaviors and establish norms that reinforce that culture from the start. For example, if you truly want a democratic, participatory process, make certain that everyone is given a time at the first meeting to express their views on several key issues. Take the time to create group ground rules or operating principles that can be encouraged and monitored by all participants.

Tip #6: All groups progress through predictable and unavoidable phases.

In each of these stages, different individual behaviors are apparent and specific work must be completed in order to move to the next stage of development. If the work in a specific stage is not completed, the group will either return to that stage at a later time or their work together may be interrupted.

Tip #7: Opportunities for group reflection are necessary for learning and improvement.

They don't call you "activists" for nothing. You live to "do" things in this world. But there is power in taking time to reflect on a group's efforts, to determine what worked well and what didn't, and then to plan for future work equipped with tested experience and new insights.

Additional Resources

Source: Working Together: A Toolkit for Cooperative Efforts, Networks and Coalitions, Copyright 2006 by the Institute for Conservation Leadership.

To order a copy, visit:

<http://www.icl.org/resources/publications/working-together-toolkit-cooperative-efforts-networks-and-coalitions>

Future Tip Sheet Ideas?

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