

Chapter 6

“Keeping It All Together”

Organizational Development and Maintenance

BROADENING THE BASE

It's one thing to organize a successful group and quite another to hold it all together. Creating a grassroots community organization is not like building a house brick by brick, plank by plank into a fixed, permanent structure. An organization is dynamic, not static, and as ACORN founder Wade Rathke says, “If it isn't growing, it's dying.”

Organizational growth depends on retaining old members and enlisting new ones. The success of both endeavors depends on a combination of things: a shared, compelling vision; a functional, democratic structure; participatory group processes; and a strong capacity for leadership development.

Obviously, one key to organizational maintenance is keeping members active, but some attrition is inevitable as people's lives, responsibilities, and concerns change over time. The fact that membership commitment may ebb and flow should be squarely recognized, but there is a number of measures a GCO can take to guard against an overly high dropoff rate.

Certainly, the long-range organizational vision will be key. Fixing potholes will not keep the membership active and excited forever. It is important to develop a new sense of community and the challenge of more ambitious goals. Organizational growth and maturity should lead to both the will and the capacity to take on more challenging issues. The organizing process should build commitment to and a thirst for changing power relationships. When opportunities arise, GCOs need to seize the moment, taking bold steps in pursuit of transformative social change. More people will stay active if they believe they are part of an effort that is exciting and momentous.

ACORN provides an excellent example. The organization's vision and philosophy are stressed in everything it does. There is a commitment to

organizing as many low- and moderate-income people as possible, wherever they live and work. Strong linkage has been made to homemakers, domestics, hotel employees, fast-food workers, and other low-wage earners, as ACORN attempts to deal with issues in the workplace as well as on the block.

The goal is to organize the constituency, not merely to improve a specific neighborhood. The neighborhood is a manageable size unit, allowing the organization to start “where people are at” on self-interest issues of immediate concern. But producing quick victories at the neighborhood level is not the sole end of the action. The leadership recognizes the interrelationship of issues at the city, state, and national levels. There is a broader commitment to put power in the hands of low- and moderate-income people.

As with all organizations, ACORN’s resources are limited. Questions of *breadth versus depth* emerge. Certainly all of its budget could be spent in one city such as New Orleans, Philadelphia, Chicago, or Detroit. It also could concentrate on one state such as New York, Ohio, or California. Alternatively, it could spread itself out further by attempting to have a presence in every city and state in the country. What’s the best way to achieve its long-range goals of redistributive change empowering low- and moderate-income people? At what point would the depth be so thin that only “paper organizations” would be formed in neighborhoods across the United States? When would a concentration of resources in fewer places seriously diminish the organization’s ability to wage statewide, regional or national campaigns?

To organize 10 percent of a neighborhood is both realistic and adequate for ACORN’s purposes. Obviously, this is not 10 percent of every low-income neighborhood—even in the cities where this GCO currently is successful. And, just as clearly, any organization that involves 50 percent of the residents will have a stronger base in that particular neighborhood. But if ACORN were to commit the resources to organize at this level of depth, it would have to do so by sacrificing breadth. *Organizing more intensively in fewer places produces more clout on local issues, but at the price of power at the state, regional, and national levels.* Decisions about the scope and scale of organizing should be made consistent with a GCO’s long-range goals. For ACORN, the current mix produces sufficient depth without compromising the breadth necessary to be an important player on many issues beyond the citywide level.

A decentralized coordinated structure allows local issue autonomy for neighborhood chapters, while providing a mechanism to undertake joint campaigns at the city, state, regional, and national levels. A representative decision-making board deals with issues at the higher levels, but doesn’t dictate on neighborhood affairs. Local groups can introduce their issues to the other ACORN chapters through the board and get support from

the parent organization. At all levels, there is an effort to find issues that have the potential for broadening the base.

Thus, there is a mix of both local and higher-level campaigns. The larger issues are linked to the long-range goals and expectations of ACORN. They challenge power relationships and help realize visions for social change. The neighborhood issues keep the base of the organization strong and active on an immediate self-interest agenda. General issues, such as utility rates or taxes, are not allowed to interfere with more specific local ones, like the meat-rendering plant that stinks up the neighborhood or the closing of the local fire station.

There is an emphasis on the importance of internal fundraising to the longer-term viability of the organization. This builds solidarity and an ongoing commitment to active involvement. ACORN leaders share a collective vision that requires an independent source of funds. They recognize that significant conflict is inevitable and refuse to depend heavily on institutional moneys.

The ACORN example shows how the organizational vision, a good structure, effective group processes, and a commitment to shared values can retain existing members while attracting new ones. It is critical that emerging leaders be plugged into meaningful, important roles. They need to be challenged, trained, and prepared to take on positions of responsibility. This is the way the core group is enlarged upon and new leadership begins to develop. Whoever acts as organizer can help this process along. Tasks such as dues collection, leafleting, and reminder phone calls should be delegated whenever possible. This builds the emerging leaders' sense of investment in and ownership of the organization. It also frees organizers to concentrate on expansion, rather than spending all their time on maintenance work.

When building for a new campaign, it is not sufficient for a group merely to recruit its existing (and possibly inactive or declining) members. People may have joined because of interests in totally different issues. In other cases, various physical and emotional factors will prevent them from participating. On the other hand, there still may be innumerable non-members in the affected constituency.

All this argues for continuous outreach to the whole constituency, rather than just contacting the current membership. *It is a classic case of the need to organize the unorganized.* Only by attracting and involving new people can the GCO renew and regenerate itself in the face of the natural tendency for people to lose interest, drop out, or become less active. Organizations are continually being reborn as new people get involved. Good "recruitment issues" appealing to a broad base of people and lending themselves to systematic face-to-face contact are what build or maintain the size of a GCO. Too often, groups focus most of their attention on "maintenance issues" that don't attract large numbers of new people.

When this happens, the power base can wither and die while the leadership stays preoccupied with winning policy reform.

Nevertheless, the “apathy” of the constituency usually is blamed for declines in membership. Anyone who has been around an organization probably has heard the familiar complaints about “dropouts” and been asked the eternal question, “*How do you keep people involved?*” Frequently, the most committed leaders and members criticize their colleagues for “only coming out when there’s something in it for themselves.” Yet, this is the essence of self-interest—“What’s in it for me?” or “WIFM.” People do participate in order to gain something. Unlike the limited number of leaders who can gain recognition, status, respect, self-esteem, confidence, skills, excitement, power, and personal satisfaction from their positions, most rank-and-file participants are attracted primarily by the prospects of victory on the issue, along with opportunities to connect with other community members.

There is a trade-off. Their involvement is needed to win through collective action. It also helps build the organization. They do their part by turning out for actions and playing a meaningful role in the campaign. Hopefully, the organization produces a concrete benefit or reform for them. When the campaign is over, most of them are back at home—even though their name may be on the GCO’s membership rolls. If the experience not only provided a victory on the issue but also was exciting, fun, and satisfying, they probably will participate again—when it’s in their self-interests to do so. “Dropping out” may be logical and reasonable in the interim.

An organization’s members can be conceptualized as being arranged in a *series of concentric circles*. At the center are the top elected leaders and activists. The next circle includes second-line leaders and the most solid members who get involved in a majority of organizational actions and activities. Together, these two groups form the “core.” Next would come people who seldom take roles of responsibility or leadership but who identify with and participate in many organizational campaigns and functions. Succeeding circles would encompass those who take part sporadically and may or may not consider themselves members. If you prefer a more linear model, think of community members distributed along a *continuum of commitment*.

Organizational involvement correlates highly with an individual’s positive experiences through meaningful roles in participatory, action-oriented campaigns. Opportunities for more responsibility and work can be built into all activities, actions, and events—sort of a “leadership ladder” for new members to climb. It’s this kind of broad-based involvement that’s the strongest antidote for the tendencies toward centralized leadership and conservative, rigid organizational structure. The campaigns help renew the connection between leaders and their base of followers, increasing accountability and invigorating group processes.

And often the key lies with those who best could be categorized as second-line leaders, for these are the people who provide basic connection

between the top leaders and the rank-and-file members. As potential prime leaders themselves, they can offer both a healthy challenge to and a democratizing influence on the highest leaders, keeping them honest and on their toes. Their presence helps overcome the tendency for leaders to grow out of touch and to ignore their followers. Second-line leaders usually have not been recognized, accepted, or co-opted by the powers that be, and thus may be strong advocates for using direct-action strategies and tactics when the situation calls for such an approach. In short, their position and the dynamics of their possible rise to power make them a pivotal force.

Yet, too often when conservative entrenched leaders are in place, there's a preoccupation with changing their behavior by "raising consciousness," rather than by new people pressuring them from below. There may be workshops, training sessions, and a variety of other devices to "enlighten" the top leaders. Certainly, education and instruction are critical to the fundamental goal of leadership development. But such teaching and learning absolutely should not be limited to the top leadership echelons. When this occurs, the highest leaders become far more knowledgeable and sophisticated than the rest of the group's members. This can lead to gaps in information and critical awareness. It only exacerbates the natural tendency for prime leaders to become distanced from their base and to centralize power.

The whole training process should be expanded and democratized. Second-line leaders and members need the kind of knowledge and skills that enable them to challenge and test the top leaders in a healthy way. Obviously, such an ambitious program means more work for those who recruit and organize for it. And perhaps it is less satisfying for ideologues searching for a small group of "true believer" converts. But it is critical to spread the wealth of information, skills, and political consciousness to as many people as possible.

Similarly, the same principle of maximizing opportunities for participation should be considered when bylaws are formulated. There should be a balance between the needs for efficiency and expertise on the one hand and involvement and training on the other. Too often the former is emphasized at the expense of the latter. In some cases, bylaws are written as though the group always functions in perfect harmony without power struggles or internal conflict. Such approaches emphasize technical tasks and skills, without much recognition of or stress on intragroup dynamics and processes.

Nevertheless, there is a limit to how much bylaws really can do. Ultimately, they merely serve as written rules and procedures for a group to follow. The same dynamics that enable a small faction to dominate an organization often allow that same group to ignore the official ground rules. If there are not other leaders and members willing and able to take on leaders who act undemocratically, bylaws alone offer little or no organizational protection, no matter how well crafted. Leadership accountability, membership participation, and organizational direct action cannot be legislated

by any legalistic, defensive cure-all set of rules. People, not paper, keep organizations open and action-oriented.

The real strength of good bylaws lies in their ability to specify positive ways in which new people can get involved. For instance, there should be a clear process by which rank-and-file members can approve and join a new committee to work on an issue of basic concern. Too often, such decisions are left in the hands of a small core group that may refuse to take on a new issue or may want to control the number and names of the people forming an action committee. Provisions should be in place allowing people to come to an open meeting where they can endorse a new issue by majority vote and freely volunteer to join the relevant Action Committee.

A committee structure that rewards action and broad-based participation helps prevent excessive bureaucracy and the centralization of power. Responsibility and accountability can be built in through the guidelines and procedures by which committees are approved, formed, and terminated and by which leadership is chosen. *More committees working on more issues give more people exposure to more learning situations.* This enables community members to get involved in a meaningful way at any point in time. New or second-line leaders can come to the fore.

Whether the specific maintenance problem is dropouts, centralized power, lack of democracy, co-optation, or conservative bureaucratization, all are linked by the fact that GCOs with these difficulties no longer are participatory, mass-based, and action-oriented. In each case, *the most effective remedy is to cut new issues and recruit large numbers of people whose self-interest directly is affected.*

Where there is a likelihood of resistance, or even backlash, from entrenched leaders who feel threatened by change, it is critical that the organizer and new leadership attempt to neutralize them. They don't have to be won over to the point of enthusiastically welcoming new issues and leaders. But it is immensely helpful if the top leaders do not *actively oppose* outreach and recruitment. Bylaws, along with organizational culture and tradition, can play a crucial part in legitimating and promoting this emphasis on broadening the base. It is the task of whoever functions as organizer to do this.

Regular contact with community members through doorknocking, home visits, one-on-ones, housemeetings, presentations to groups, and networking helps infuse the organization with "new blood" and keeps it vibrant. These outreach activities are a primary means for surfacing new issues, as well as identifying potential activists or leaders who can be plugged into the group's activities. It is the best way for the GCO to stay connected to its community base, "personalizing" the organization, holding its collective ears close to the ground, and letting people know what's going on. The broader and deeper the base, the more power the organization will be able to wield.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Power flows from large numbers of organized people acting together. Leaders give meaning and direction to that collective action, capturing the essence of the hopes, fears, and demands of community members. They articulate the goals of their followers; they point the way for resolution of the issues. Someone has to be committed and capable enough to get out in front and help the group accomplish the task at hand. Someone has to take ownership and control over organizational actions and activities. Leaders do this, inspiring and guiding their followers in the process.

Characteristics and Qualities

At times, the responsibilities will be public and visible; in other instances, the work will be quiet and internal. In all situations, those who function as leaders must take the initiative to motivate others, showing the way through example. Being a grassroots leader is a difficult role, requiring a wide range of personal characteristics and talents. Nobody can be expected to do it all. The individual who can lead a militant direct action against the mayor may be poorly equipped to chair a monthly chapter meeting—or vice versa. One person may be great at organizing a fundraising event, another may be a top negotiator, a third a brilliant strategist, and a fourth a terrific recruiter. Organizationally it's important to try to match people's interests and skills with the group's greatest leadership needs.

Clearly, this does not require the discovery or development of all-around superstar leaders, expert in every conceivable area. Even if such people existed, it would be dangerous to develop dependence on them. What if they moved away, got sick, had to spend more time at work, or dropped out to deal with a family crisis? Where would the group turn for leadership? A great basketball team needs a mix of rebounders, defenders, playmakers, and scorers, as well as specific role-players who know their jobs and stick to them. Talent is critical, but so is the meshing of individual egos and abilities into a team identity that transcends any one person. Organizations work the same way. Some people may be stars of sorts, elected to office or charismatically leading public actions. Others may play a more limited, less visible role, providing commitment and energy for a host of critical internal tasks. All need to work together, sharing responsibility, work, and credit, functioning as a team in pursuit of common goals.

While there is a wide range of leadership roles requiring a broad mix of talents and abilities, some common qualities are important regardless of the specific function undertaken. Clearly, anyone who leads must be connected to a "following" or be able to develop one very quickly. Trust and confidence must be established among those who will follow. Listening

skills should be strengthened along with the willingness and ability to let others get some recognition and glory. Leaders should be able to communicate well, inspiring and motivating their colleagues and increasing self-reliance, ownership, and control in the process.

Characteristics such as charisma, anger, courage, and intelligence all may help accomplish the above, but no one of these absolutely is essential in and of itself. What *is* required is a commitment to and investment in social change that drives a person to make the time sacrifice and do the hard work necessary for the task at hand. This takes energy, determination, assertiveness, persistence, and mental toughness. There are no guarantees for those who take collective action against the powers that be. Risks are required, pressures must be endured, sacrifices have to be made. The person accepting a leadership role in such a situation must have sufficient self-interest, self-confidence, and self-control to overcome these dangers. He or she needs a good sense of humor and perspective, as well as a willingness to learn and grow as the action flows.

Certainly, there is no place for the undemocratic person who refuses to let others play a meaningful part in actions and activities. Those who do not respect others and seek to grab all power and credit only hurt the organization in the long run, regardless of their individual talents. Obviously, they will not help develop the potential of those around them. While they may be brilliant and charismatic, they will not help create the collective leadership and broad-based participation so necessary for organizational growth. Additional characteristics that undermine these goals are racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, other forms of prejudice, unquestioned allegiance to politicians, lack of commitment or resolve, limited time, timidity, undependability, insensitivity, and dishonesty.

Organizations with the broadest base of participation usually develop the best leaders and, in turn, those leaders help increase membership involvement. Existing leaders and organizers have the responsibility for expanding the leadership core and motivating, teaching, and supporting the new people who emerge.

Developmental Methods

By building on people's existing *strengths*, it is more likely that their first leadership experience will be positive and reinforcing. Then, at a later point, they can be challenged to take on new roles and responsibilities, stretching their talents and capabilities. A shared or collective form of leadership should be developed whenever possible. For instance, ACORN periodically holds special training sessions for second-line leaders. The gatherings strengthen specific skills, as well as give people a greater sense of the organization's history and vision. Solidarity and ownership are as much an outcome of these sessions as are particular methods and tech-

niques. Members emerge more committed to the organization and energized for active roles in their own local chapters. Because training is *limited to second-line leaders*, new people are added to the existing leadership group.

A number of other techniques can be used to develop the abilities, skills, and confidence of emerging leaders. Involvement in *recruitment activities* is a particularly helpful activity, because small-scale interactions (door-knocking, home visits, one-on-ones, and housemeetings) enable new leaders to practice articulating organizational goals, describing issue campaigns, answering questions about the GCO, and persuading community members to join. Recruiters take on a teaching role, deepening their own commitment in the process of convincing others and developing a much more thorough understanding about their GCO.

Pairing new folks with established leaders in a "buddy system" gives the veterans a chance to model and mentor, while the "rookies" learn by observing their actions and absorbing their advice. In the early stages, the upcoming leaders might do little more than "shadow" their more seasoned colleagues, but over time, they can take on a variety of manageable but meaningful responsibilities that enable them to develop *new capacities and skills*. The process should be incremental, moving at a pace that challenges emerging leaders without overwhelming them. Their commitment and ability to follow through on assignments should be tested within a supportive environment as they move up the "leadership ladder." As experienced leaders teach and train, their own status is elevated, often easing any reservations they may have about sharing power with the newcomers.

The more committees that exist, the more *structural opportunities* will be available for new leadership to develop. Nevertheless, committees that once were active sometimes continue too long after they cease to function in a dynamic, action-oriented manner. When "fossilized" structures endure, the GCO may develop a "do-nothing" reputation and lose its credibility as a viable force in the community. Ad hoc committees that can be dissolved when they stop working actively on an issue or task help prevent this problem.

For instance, within a standing housing committee (or instead of one), a GCO might form a specific action subcommittee to win an inclusionary zoning ordinance for affordable housing, another to establish a homesteading program, and a third to deal with an abandoned house. Each of the three distinct structures would appeal more directly to the self-interests of a particular constituency, increasing levels of identification and commitment. Once the issues were resolved or stalemated, the committees could be discontinued, while the organization moved on to other specific issue campaigns.

Three committees versus one also would provide more entry points for emerging leaders to get involved and take on more responsibility. The multiple subcommittee structures would increase the number of opportunities for them to hold significant organizational roles, gaining experience

and a sense of ownership in the process. Tasks such as co-chairing meetings, doing action research, giving reports, contacting the media, reaching out to possible allies, and recruiting more participants for the Action Group could be divided or rotated as appropriate.

As new leaders develop and grow, they learn individual lessons and draw their own conclusions based on their *direct experience* as organizational actors in these subcommittees. Others can help by working closely with these newcomers—coaching, supporting, challenging, sharing knowledge, and helping them develop critical thinking capacities. Initially, it's essential to *assess their willingness to take on additional roles and tasks* at upcoming meetings, events, and actions. This usually is accomplished through one-on-one discussions. Organizers and veteran leaders need to be sensitive about how “pushy” they should be when attempting to get inexperienced members to do more work. The idea is to increase their level of involvement, but not to alienate them—to stretch their commitment and capacities without breaking their connection to the GCO.

Once developing leaders indicate a willingness to *accept* added responsibility, it's essential that they be *assigned* new roles and tasks and *prepared* for their duties. Typically, GCOs divide up assignments at planning meetings and then get ready by practicing, rehearsing, and role-playing. Socratic questioning and an examination of “What if?” contingencies can be very helpful. Videotapes of similar situations or some of the GCO's own leaders in action also can be an effective training and preparation device. In other cases, leaders with direct experience can relate their own ideas and advice. Ideally, both individual and collective objectives will be established for every action and activity. All leaders should be clear about the roles they will play and the expectations of others. The small group setting provides a safe and supportive climate for these activities, serving as an “incubator of empowerment” (Anderson, 1992).

In all instances, there should be basic discussion about goals, problems, options, expectations, and specific plans with responsibilities and roles clearly defined and accepted. Existing leaders and organizers can help develop new leaders by assessing people's strengths, complementing them, delegating work, and helping them carry out those tasks. This includes encouraging, urging, teaching, planning, practicing, supporting, and evaluating. Those helping to develop new leaders play a role that is analogous to a coach for a sports team. They can't play the game for another person, but they can prepare them for it and sharpen their skills. They can help new leaders think through problems and options, so that they can make adjustments and decisions accordingly.

After the planning meeting, *further coaching and support should be given on a one-to-one basis*. This is a time for reinforcement and confidence boosting. It's normal for many new leaders to experience a degree of self-doubt and anxiety as the action or event draws closer. Individual role-playing and

practice of speaking parts can be helpful. Contact with veteran leaders may be reassuring. Consistent contact should be maintained and every effort made to make sure that they don't develop "cold feet." Their anger at injustice and self-interest in the issues being addressed usually are strong enough to insure follow-through on responsibilities.

The deepest learning takes place when people actually *perform* their roles and responsibilities and then *reflect* on the experience, engaging in *praxis*. The assessment process and questions described in Chapter 5 help facilitate the dialectical process of *praxis* that synthesizes action and reflection. *Praxis* enables leaders and other community members to become more analytical about a range of subjects, including the nature and dynamics of oppression, power disparities, the distribution of wealth, the root causes of the issues that confront them, the power of collective action, the motives and methods of targets and opponents, self-interest, ideology, and the social construction of reality.

A number of writers have distinguished between leadership training that simply teaches skills for grassroots activists and developing the capacity for critical consciousness (Freire, 1970; Burghardt, 1982; Breton, 1995; Gutierrez, 1995; Carroll and Minkler, 2000). Needless to say, *organizational mileage will be much more significant when this deeper level of leadership development is infused into every aspect of a GCO's activities, combining practical skills, personal growth, participatory competencies* (Kieffer, 1984), *consciousness raising, neopopulist democratic principles* (Fisher, 1997), *and strategies for collective empowerment*. Virtually every organizational activity, event, and campaign should be utilized as a learning experience.

Morris has introduced the concept of "oppositional consciousness," defined as a "set of insurgent ideas and beliefs constructed and developed by an oppressed group for the purpose of guiding its struggle to undermine, reform, or overthrow a system of domination" (Mansbridge and Morris, 2001; Morris, 1992, p. 363). *Leadership development that incorporates praxis and critical analysis of power disparities usually leads to "oppositional consciousness."* Mansbridge (2001) asserts that there are four elements in this process: (1) identification with other members of a subordinate group, (2) recognition of injustices suffered by the group, (3) opposition to those injustices, and (4) awareness that the group has a shared interest in working to ameliorate those injustices and a need for collective action.

While critical awareness and oppositional consciousness develop most directly through the *praxis* of issue campaigns, structured workshops, training sessions, conferences, readings, films, guest speakers, and observations of other GCOs all can and should be utilized for leadership development. The organizational culture should encourage debate, discussion, critical analysis, and continual learning. The most powerful organizations will have multiple forms of leadership developed through a variety of methods.

GROUP PRODUCTS AND PROCESSES

Essentially there are two things to consider when assessing organizational development and maintenance: the outcomes or *products* of collective action and the group *processes* by which tasks are accomplished—*what* is produced and *how* those results are achieved. Clearly, the two affect one another. Successful GCOs tend to have a high level of member satisfaction. When many community members are involved in planning, carrying out, and assessing organizational actions and activities, success is more likely. Actions, meetings, and other events need to be both effective and enjoyable. People participate best when there are both tangible and psychological rewards; they need to achieve a degree of success on organizational goals and objectives, while also experiencing personal recognition, enhanced self-esteem, and stronger connections to other community members.

My own experience indicates that many leaders and organizers worry much more about accomplishing tasks than developing good group processes. This can turn people off. Organizations only have the partial commitment and involvement of their members, who have other things to do than participate in a GCO. It is critical that community members feel important, needed, and part of something special. Solidarity and spirit are more than pleasant by-products of group involvement. Maintenance and development do not turn solely on *what* the organization accomplishes. It is equally important *how* members perceive their leaders in action and *how* they see themselves contributing.

An organization is more than its formal structure, budget, constitution, and track record of victories. It is also the informal shared assumptions, perceptions, and expectations of its members; the values they hold; the ways they go about doing things. This is the *organizational culture* that helps form a GCO's identity. Ultimately, people's commitment depends on how they actually experience real involvement. Most organizational work takes place in *small task groups*. These settings can provide excellent opportunities for discussion, strategic analysis, consciousness raising, action research, planning, decision making, recruitment, leadership training, community education, negotiating, lobbying, and evaluation. A few basic guidelines for effective small-group products and processes follow.

Composition, Contracting, and Culture

The configuration of working groups within a GCO will (or at least *should*) vary from task to task. Core activists often will be involved simultaneously with several committees or subgroups; and the same people may play very different roles in the various groups, depending on their interest in the business at hand, available time, expertise, and

interpersonal relationships with other members. When tasks are simple and straightforward, existing research shows that five to seven people is the optimum *size* for effective problem solving, while twelve to fifteen participants are preferable for more complex problems (Bakalinsky, 1984). Since GCOs typically attempt to involve lots of people on most aspects of organizational work, subcommittees of five to seven people can be used creatively to gain efficiency when committees become unwieldy.

Half a century of research dating back to Redl (1942) clearly has demonstrated that it is best to avoid having only one group member along descriptive characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, age category, sexual orientation, and other relevant variables. The reason for this rule of thumb is the tendency for such individuals to be marginalized, tokenized, or scapegoated in these situations. To the extent that there is a degree of control over the *composition* of working groups, organizers and leaders should be sensitive to this potential problem and simply should take steps to recruit at least one more group member sharing the particular characteristic. Group composition should be reflective of the larger community, taking full advantage of the multiple perspectives that can be contributed by a diverse membership.

Once a work group is created, it's essential for its members to agree on its basic purpose, priorities, parameters, and policies. "Contracting means reaching an agreement about why a group exists, how long it will exist, what will be expected of the members, how and whether the group will be structured formally, what will be expected of a staff person (if there is one), what a group's relationships will be with other groups and the organization that sponsors it (if there is such an organization), which outcomes should be considered successes and which as failures, and often other matters as well" (as cited in Ephross and Vassil, 1988; Shulman, 1984; Schwartz, 1976). Essentially, *contracting* is the process of establishing mutual expectations among all participants.

It's important to get these basic issues out on the table at an early stage, clarifying the group's charge, structure, and relationship to other parts of the organization. The way that the group actually operates will become clearer over time. *Committees, task forces, and boards develop their own organizational cultures*, ranging from meeting times and places, attention to punctuality, food at meetings, child care, participant and staff roles, use of formal agendas, behavior in meetings, manner of interaction, gender and age dynamics, style of chairing, acceptable levels of conflict, decision-making processes, note taking, length of meetings, and follow-through on assignments.

Often these elements never are formally discussed and may not even be noticed until violated. However, group culture is very real and can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, these taken-for-granted norms

usually will be within the “comfort zone” of regular in-group members, making participation pleasant and enjoyable. On the other hand, the manner in which a group operates may create severe or subtle barriers for non-members who potentially might join. These “outsiders” may take away the *unintentional* message that the group is a relatively closed system, controlled by a circle of insiders. Given the need for GCOs to attract new activists, this phenomenon can be a serious problem. It is critical that all organizational committees and task forces be perceived as open and inclusive to, and welcoming of, newcomers.

Nevertheless, putting this principle into practice can be challenging. Increasingly, the United States is becoming a more multicultural society. At one time, the concept of “community” was virtually interchangeable with “neighborhood.” Certain geographic areas were closely identified with particular ethnic groups. In many major cities, when a person referred to the Irish, African American, Polish, Puerto Rican, or Italian “communities,” he or she also would be talking about a distinct piece of turf. Now, ethnic communities typically transcend any one neighborhood, and the area in which a GCO organizes may have a plethora of different groups.

The growth of multiculturalism is healthy and positive, but may require special efforts for groups to establish cultures that actively embrace ethnic diversity. Significant *differences* may exist between ethnic groups on many of the variables listed above, such as the best times and places to hold meetings, the relative importance of punctuality, whether and when to have food (before, at, after, never) and what to serve, whether or not to allow children in meetings, behaviors and styles of interacting, and so forth. A policy or pattern that is agreeable to one group may turn off others.

These decisions and practices tend to be established by the folks in attendance at the initial meetings. Hearing no objections, they consciously or unconsciously may begin operating in a particular manner conveying a clear sense of style and substance that may be inviting or off-putting to potential members, depending on variables such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, or age. While the development of group culture is inevitable and has many benefits, including the fostering of *cohesiveness*, it is essential that the most influential members be sensitive to the messages being communicated.

Group culture is socially constructed and should be seen as a work in progress rather than a finished product. There should be a conscious effort to establish an inclusive culture that recognizes, validates, and celebrates diversity. Yet, it is also essential to establish sufficient cohesion for the group to hang together and jell. Ideally, team building will take place, a sense of “we-ness” will develop, and the members will experience a measure of pleasure and pride as participants, *but not at the expense of identification with and loyalty to the overall grassroots community organization.*

Decision Making

The act and art of making good group decisions is a prime example of the need to balance task effectiveness with participatory democratic processes. An inefficient process usually produces a less than satisfactory decision, but a "rush to judgment" almost guarantees a product that will not be widely and deeply embraced. GCOs should develop sound and sensitive operating procedures that are relatively consistent across all committees and task forces.

Community members will make better decisions when problems are approached systematically and analytically. The first step in the process should be defining the situation clearly and agreeing on the task at hand. For instance, the fundraising committee might be meeting to decide what to do next. One member might argue that the group should make a plan for raising its total of \$15,000. Another might want to focus on doing an event in the next month that could raise \$2,500. A third might be concerned with involving more members in the committee's work. A fourth might want to plan a good social event that concentrated more on building spirit and solidarity than raising big money. At the outset, the group would have to prioritize its goals and agree on the problems to be tackled.

Next, it would make sense to list the various alternatives from which the committee could choose. Using the "brainstorming technique," all options could be listed without evaluating their individual merit. This helps get all the possibilities out on the table without getting bogged down in discussion of any one point. Let's assume the committee has decided to plan an event that could involve lots of members as workers while raising at least \$2,500. Suggestions include a carnival, banquet, raffle, auction, dance, ad book, and a car wash.

After all alternatives have been listed, evaluations can begin. The car wash and dance might be rejected quickly by the group as being unable to yield the targeted amount of money. The ad book might be deferred to the annual convention, while the auction and carnival might be seen as too ambitious for this particular group at this time. After weighing all pros and cons, the options might be narrowed to holding a banquet or doing a raffle. Some mechanism would be needed for making a decision. Expecting the chairperson to make a unilateral decision as the group's official leader clearly is not acceptable, and certainly a vocal minority should not be allowed to railroad through a decision by yelling the loudest. Ideally, the group would decide either by *voting* or through *consensus*.

Voting is the quickest and surest way to get a clear decision. A formal vote may be necessary for official policy decisions, such as raising the membership dues, joining a coalition, endorsing a piece of legislation, changing bylaws, or electing officers. Voting may be the best mechanism for reaching decisions and moving the group forward when fundamental

disagreements exist. Often, it is the only means to break a logjam when different factions refuse to budge on a particular position. But there also are liabilities, since someone clearly will lose; and the losers may become angry or withdrawn, failing to commit themselves to the majority decision or plotting to even the score with adversaries. As a result, a less than enthusiastic mandate for the decisions made by voting may be in place.

Consensus eliminates this problem, because everyone agrees and, hopefully, feels good about the decision. This helps insure high commitment and follow-through on responsibilities. Frequently, a consensus develops quite naturally as group members discuss and debate various courses of action. A formal vote may or may not be required, but in such situations, it is almost an afterthought. However, when a group employs consensus to resolve more complex or controversial issues, a major *time commitment* may be required, so that everyone's views can be expressed fully and agreement is reached. There is a danger of becoming bogged down in endless debate and developing an orientation that is "more talk than action." The opposite phenomenon, identified as "*groupthink*" by Janis (1972), may occur when participants get caught up in the excitement of a premature consensus, suspend their critical thinking, and fail to challenge the momentum of a dominant, but flawed, decision.

A variation of consensus is the *compromise*, where no one party gets entirely what it wants, but everyone feels that he or she can support the decision. Compromises seldom satisfy many people and often result in only limited commitment to decisions. Nevertheless, they help avoid "win-lose" situations in which defeated parties become alienated and disengaged. The operative guideline for *most small working groups holds that it is usually preferable to reach consensus whenever possible, perhaps followed by a formal vote whenever it is useful to have an "official" decision.* When consensus is not feasible, compromises may be less divisive than "all-or-nothing" votes, although individual circumstances will dictate the optimal decision-making method. In all instances, the goal is an informed, wise decision made through an inclusive, participatory process.

Membership and Leader Roles

Small-group members should be willing to take responsibility, contributing their knowledge, abilities, and skills as needed. Good participation entails sharing ideas, decisions, work, and credit with one another to mesh into a team effort. Participants need to get the message that their opinions are valuable and their help is appreciated. Nevertheless, new people should not be overwhelmed with work at their first sign of interest. They need to establish mutual confidence and trust with other members. Someone needs to provide them training, support, and feedback for their efforts. Essentially, they should be phased in around their own self-

interests and strengths, actively involved in nonthreatening group discussion, and constructively encouraged to take on more responsibility at a reasonable pace.

Leaders can play a key role in drawing new people in and improving group processes. Rather than asking general questions, they can make a point of seeking personal opinions from different individuals without unduly putting them on the spot. Techniques such as brainstorming can protect people's ideas from immediate judgmental assessments. Instead of scolding their colleagues for lack of participation and failure to take responsibility, leaders can make constructive suggestions for needed tasks and possible people to do them. Where apathy exists, smaller subgroups may be formed to help stimulate more active involvement. Leaders can provide active listening, constructive feedback, advice, and support; they can serve as role models, mentors, and coaches, engaging the membership by different means and methods.

In a classic study, Robert Bales (1970) identified two distinct types of leadership roles in task-oriented groups: *instrumental (product) leaders* who manage the movement forward to accomplish concrete goals and objectives, and *socio-emotional (process) leaders* who are concerned with members' feelings, perceptions, attitudes, opinions, and subjective experiences. Bales found that both types of leadership were crucial components of productive, stable groups, but that one person seldom filled both roles. My personal experience certainly bears this out. Typically, one or two people take primary responsibility for making sure that a group stays on point, gets through the agenda, makes the requisite decisions, assigns responsibilities for tasks outside the meeting, and starts planning its next steps. And, very often, other folks bring a card for someone who is out sick, remember another member's birthday, help soothe hurt feelings when tempers flare, or reach out to a newcomer who hangs back. This phenomenon certainly underscores the rationale for multiple forms of leadership and shared models for exercising it.

Frequently, leaders' task and process functions will blend, as when they clarify, reframe, synthesize, summarize, expand on the ideas of others, or help make the connection to what previously was said. Sometimes they must take the initiative and lead by example, modeling behavior and standards for their followers. In other instances, they should enable, facilitate, and allow different people to show the way. While their own knowledge and opinions will be key, they should take care that others do not simply defer to their views. Ownership and investment will be furthered when a range of different people get to play an active role. The best leaders will improve group process by constantly attempting to motivate and energize their colleagues to do more.

Leaders also must be able to deal with problematic members whose behavior threatens the group process. Aggressive, dominating people,

ideologues, and extremists need to be handled firmly but fairly and prevented from controlling the group. Folks who tend to talk too much, stray off the point, or gossip about their colleagues need to be centered and focused. Those who negatively block discussion or disrupt it by clowning cannot be allowed to undermine overall progress. And members should not be permitted to turn the group into their own personal platform for presenting individual problems, insecurities, interests, and pet peeves.

At any point in time, many different group dynamics are at work. Ephross and Vassil (1988) have developed a particularly useful concept that they call “*quadrifocal vision*,” which calls for the simultaneous awareness and “focus on individual group members, subgroups, the group as a whole, and the place of the group in the organization of which it is a part” (74). The authors make a convincing argument that none of these four levels should be ignored, and that the different elements will move periodically from the background to the foreground and then back again. Leaders, staff, and experienced group members all need to be aware of these dynamics and act accordingly.

For instance, it’s important to be sensitive to *individuals* who may be shy, disaffected, angry, or preoccupied with personal concerns. *Subgroups* always are present and fall on a continuum from supportive of the leadership through indifferent and detached to outright hostile. Members of the working group may be in multiple subgroups concurrently, based on factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, disability, kinship or friendship networks, homeowner/tenant status, political orientation, occupation, education, geography, and a host of other dimensions. Obviously, it is essential to be attuned to the *group as a whole*, and it is critical to never lose sight of how the working group fits into the *larger* GCO.

Conflict

It is also generally healthy to allow group *conflicts* and disagreements to surface naturally. Maintaining too rigid control and suppressing all controversy only proves counterproductive in the long run. Usually things work out best when there is open discussion of differences and conflict is normalized. Power struggles, factions, hidden agendas, and disputes are inevitable; competition may increase at different stages of the group’s growth.

Leaders need to help the group work through such difficulties, maintaining fairness and evenhandedness in the process. While there may be internal problems, it is essential not to let divisions become public and exploitable by opponents. And resolving these conflicts requires a good sense of *timing*. At times, nothing should be done, while in other cases, quick, assertive intervention will be necessary. Too often there is a tendency to focus on the personalities of the key actors, rather than their self-interests

and structural positions. As the saying goes, "Where you stand is where you sit." Leaders may be called on to mediate disputes, offer compromises, reframe "win-lose" disagreements, or otherwise reduce bad feelings and defuse explosive situations. These are difficult tasks requiring active listening, interactive skills, consensus building, sensitivity, and honesty.

Successful resolution will be more possible with good *communication* and ample opportunities for *feedback*. Whether it be written information via newsletters, fact sheets, agendas, and minutes, or word-of-mouth contact through phone trees, doorknocking, housemeetings, and building captains, good communication is essential. It helps build knowledge, trust, commitment, and solidarity. It is through GCO members' feedback to their leaders that plans are tested and changed. More importantly, feedback gives rank-and-file members a sense of their importance and power. It builds ownership and control at the most basic level. Community members are able to play a direct role in determining their own future. And that's what organizing is all about.

CONDUCTING SUCCESSFUL MEETINGS

One real test of a GCO's leaders is their ability to organize productive, participatory, efficient meetings for a variety of purposes, such as planning, recruitment, information sharing, decision making, ratification, elections, actions, negotiations, training, fundraising, and evaluation. Many of these gatherings will be relatively small, such as those held for committees, task forces, officers, housemeetings, and training workshops. Others will be large assemblies for general membership, coalitions, conventions, public hearings, social functions, media events, and action meetings.

All meetings should be lively and as much fun as possible, involving all participants in significant discussions, decisions, and roles. Good meetings should build excitement and a sense of collective identity. Like actions, they are a primary arena through which people experience the organization and their collective power. When skillfully led, they should draw out ideas from new people and plug those folks into positions of real responsibility.

Organizations such as ACORN hold neighborhood chapter meetings on a regular monthly basis. The time, date, and place are institutionalized, for instance, 7:30 P.M. on the first Tuesday of the month at St. Mary's Church. Planning committee meetings precede each neighborhood meeting, giving the leadership a chance to prepare a tight agenda and think through the options for action. The regular schedule helps foster stability and continuity.

Nevertheless, there's often a tendency for groups to meet when it's not really necessary. Too many meetings can cause burnout and turn off the membership. Most people really don't enjoy going to meetings unless there's a compelling reason to do so. The meeting size also should be appropriate

for the task at hand, reflecting the participants' self-interest in its purpose and the unique contribution that each person can make. The largest meetings should be reserved for actions, social events, conventions, elections, and those occasions when the membership needs to ratify the suggestions of a smaller body. Generally, these major turnout events will be preceded by a number of smaller meetings to design and plan the upcoming gathering.

A large group never should gather simply to have a vague, general discussion. In fact, big meetings are not even suited for complex decision making. The high numbers usually will be unwieldy and frustrating for all concerned. And given that such large turnouts may sap organizational resources, as well as discourage further participation, they may even be counterproductive. Many tasks can be handled best by committees or subgroups, rather than the full organization. Phone calls, newsletters, or smaller committee meetings often are sufficient for passing on information, unless there is potential for major controversy.

And meetings are not a cure-all for reaching positive consensus. They won't create automatic support for a proposed decision or action. The group setting reinforces behavior both positively and negatively. Holding a large meeting to resolve a tricky and controversial issue may be an exercise in organizing a divisive fiasco. When agreement is lacking on a "hot-button issue," it's important to meet individually with key stakeholders, followed by a small gathering to find common ground and resolve the most toxic points of contention.

Good meetings (like actions) should be planned carefully, with maximum input from those likely to participate. The attendees' interests and issues should be dealt with seriously and incorporated into any decisions and plans. Their active involvement should be structured into the larger event in a meaningful way, so as to increase ownership and control. It is important to set clear goals for any meeting, then to divide the crucial tasks and responsibilities in order to increase participation while capitalizing on the members' strengths and abilities.

Ninety percent of the work should be done prior to the event itself. There is nothing magical about holding successful meetings. Think of the good ones you have attended. A tremendous amount of advance work and planning is necessary. Organizers or experienced leaders should work with key individuals both before and after formal planning sessions. It's a matter of encouraging folks and determining what they are willing to do *before* going into the planning meeting and then *following up* to support them in carrying out their assignments effectively. Large meetings can provide an invaluable testing ground for new leaders, challenging their skills and demonstrating their abilities to others. It's important that there be a conscious effort to split up the tasks among those willing and able to take on responsibility.

It is also crucial that solid work go into building attendance for the main event. The same recruitment methods described in Chapters 3 and 5 will apply—face-to-face contact, reminder phone calls, and reinforcing forms of communication. Clearly, the time and place of the meeting affect who can attend. The time should be convenient for the greatest number of people, with every attempt being made not to exclude any one faction of the Action Group. The meeting place should be familiar to the constituency, a place where they feel comfortable. Where divisions exist within the organization, the site should be as neutral as possible. Ideally, the meeting should be in a central location that most people can reach by walking; there should be clear parking directions, if folks are driving.

The size of the meeting hall should be consistent with the expected attendance. The goal is to have a slightly crowded room with all seats filled. Gymnasiums, rooms with fixed chairs, and other sites that limit flexibility to adjust to declining or escalating attendance should be avoided if possible. Some places may have several rooms of various sizes that can be used according to the group's needs. Volunteers will have to make sure that people fill in the seats in the first few rows—often there's a tendency for people to avoid these seats. One objective is to make sure that no empty chairs will be noticeable in newspaper photos or on TV news coverage.

A number of mechanical and logistical tasks or "pieces" are necessary if a meeting (or action) is to go well. Human nature can be unpredictable. The unexpected often happens at meetings, but *most physical pieces can be controlled*. Yet, far too often good meetings are seriously disrupted by mechanical errors. I have heard of meetings of more than 300 people (most of them newcomers to the organization) where the sign-in sheet was lost, leaving no efficient way to contact the attendees for future actions. I have seen sound systems that were supposed to work, but did not. I once saw 400 senior citizens among a crowd of over 700 leave in the middle of an action meeting, because the fan was broken and they were too hot. Concessions and promises that were "taped" have been missed, because someone forgot to turn over the cassette. Slide shows have fallen victim to a blown bulb, slides out of order, electricity cutoff when the lights were turned out, and endless delays while someone tried to line up the screen or find an extension cord or a phone book to prop up the projector. I could go on.

There is absolutely no excuse for any of the above failures. Murphy's Law states, "If something **can** go wrong, it **will**." This is the time to anticipate and prepare for the kinds of problems likely to emerge at the larger meeting. Leaders and organizers need to plan for the worst and have contingencies, backups, and extras for everything. Roles and assignments should be divided carefully without tying up top leaders with small but important details. Some things will have to be done prior to the meeting, others during it and a few after it's all over. Someone should coordinate logistics and have a list of all the tasks and the people responsible for performing

them (see Staples, Chapter 7). A system of group accountability should be established to help insure that everyone follows through on their specific pieces.

These responsibilities should be assigned at the planning meetings preceding the primary event. Decisions about whether to provide transportation and childcare also should be made at that time. Commitments to do so should not be made lightly. If rides are offered, it's important to line up enough volunteer drivers. There is no mileage in leaving angry people waiting on their doorstep for a ride that never comes. And while the promise of childcare may attract more people to the meeting, the quality of this service needs to be first-rate. Otherwise, parents will be worried and upset, and the kids may disrupt the meeting. Good childcare requires supervision by a sufficient number of competent people who know how to deal with kids of all ages. It should be done in a separate room away from the meeting. Care providers should have specific activities, equipment, and snacks available for the children. Those planning the meeting must be sure that when this service is offered, it can be delivered as promised. If not, those responsible better *take care and cover!*

The planning group should develop a written *agenda* and have it available for distribution well before the meeting. This is the official plan, listing things to be done, decisions to be made, information to be given, and the individuals taking a leadership role. A mix of people should handle the different parts of the agenda, and backups should be ready to step in where needed. Since those who accept responsibility are more likely to attend, breaking up the tasks also will help increase the turnout. Anyone with a speaking role should prepare carefully beforehand and have a clear sense of what they hope to accomplish. The overall plan should be realistic and not overly ambitious. *Most meetings should not exceed one and a half to two hours.* Time limits next to specific items will help control the pace and focus the discussion; actual time benchmarks will be even better (e.g., 7:40: Fundraising Committee Report; 7:50: Voter Registration Update; 8:00: Discussion about New Youth Center; and so on).

The order of the agenda topics also will be important. Quick reports and informational announcements can be placed at the beginning. This helps boost morale, as meeting participants see good progress being made as the group sails through the first few agenda items. Longer reports should be written and circulated beforehand with a short oral summary at the meeting. Where decisions are required, several explanatory sentences should be placed on the agenda so that attendees have a chance to consider the matter and get ready for discussion. Leaders should be prepared to list clear options with pros and cons, frequently making recommendations for decisions and actions.

Generally, the most controversial and time-consuming items should *not* be left for the end of the agenda. Since meetings often tend to run longer

than planned, this can result in squeezing discussion and rushing or even preventing decisions. Instead, *it is best to deal with tricky topics right in the middle of the agenda*. Participants' interest and energy will be higher at this point, late arrivals and early departees will be present, and full discussion will be possible. This also leaves room for open discussion of "new business" at the end of the meeting. Ideally, the agenda should *end on a high note* with some specific resolution for further action. The meeting should lead to action, not just talk. This should be a paramount consideration for those who develop the agenda.

Besides developing the plan for the meeting itself, the agenda also helps specify the tasks that have to be done *before* the main event. Responsibilities should be fixed, so that there is a clear sense of who is doing what and when this will be done. Someone at the planning meeting needs to make sure that people follow through on their promises and that all the preliminary pieces fall into place. Where intragroup controversy is anticipated, there should be a concerted effort to reach out to likely participants, involving them in plans for the meeting and adjusting the agenda accordingly. This step will build their sense of ownership, while simultaneously helping the leadership stay more closely in touch with the membership. This period between the planning and large meetings often is crucial for making alterations, tightening things up, and laying the foundation for later success.

When the meeting does take place, a few people need to arrive early for setup and welcoming duties. Everyone who attends should sign in, including opponents and guests. It's important that there be literature for the early arrivals and comfortable seating with good lighting. New people should be made to feel welcome, have an opportunity to join at the door, and be integrated into the group. Attendees should be able to see and hear clearly, and the setup should facilitate participation and involvement in the meeting.

The starting time should be slightly flexible. Generally, many people arrive a little bit late. It does no good to start a 7:30 P.M. meeting precisely on time if people still are streaming in the door. On the other hand, it's important not to keep those who arrived on time waiting too long. This practice also sets a bad precedent for other meetings, actions, and activities. Therefore, meetings should start as close to the announced time as possible, but should allow for some short commonsense delays of up to fifteen minutes.

Someone should be assigned to deal with the latecomers and give them written materials or a short verbal summary without disrupting the meeting. At large meetings, late arrivals can be briefed just outside the meeting room, while in smaller settings, the chair can summarize for the whole group as the newcomers settle in. When targets will be confronted at action meetings or accountability sessions, the proceedings usually should start thirty minutes prior to their arrival, so the crowd can be briefed, prepared, and "fired up" for action.

As the meeting begins, it is important to review the agenda and, under some circumstances, even to seek formal approval. The GCO's basic ground rules and procedures should be explained briefly. Formal parliamentary procedure generally should be avoided. It is too rigid and cumbersome, and often interferes with free discussion. However, there should be clear commonsense processes for making motions and amendments and voting on them. The optimum ground rules will provide order and consistency for these processes without hindering the free flow of ideas, excitement, and fun.

At formal meetings, lengthy speakers can be controlled in a number of ways. Certainly, the written time limits on the agenda will help, and speakers can be reminded of the timeline before they begin. Someone sitting nearby also can signal them if they start to exceed their cutoff point. Often the chair can intercede by asking a question and pointing out that others in the audience need time to raise their own questions. In more extreme cases, when the speaker is an opponent or politician, someone may need to use an egg timer or other signaling device. This helps depersonalize the move to limit the speaker. Of course, in action meetings, the GCO usually will *want* to personalize and pressure the target. The floor team can involve the rest of the crowd in demanding that the speaker cut the rhetoric and deal with the issue at hand.

The chairperson has the responsibility of moving the group through the agenda, focusing discussion, and involving people actively in decisions. A chairperson must put personal issues and feelings aside and function in the interests of the entire group. On the occasions when he or she wants to advocate strongly for a particular position on a very controversial matter, the chair can step down from the role during deliberations on that agenda item. The co-chair or other designated substitute can take over and preside impartially, while the regular chair is free to engage in the debate just like any other member. Once the agenda item is finished, the parties can return to their former roles.

Chairpeople should treat everyone fairly, facilitating group discussion and increasing participation by drawing out the quiet folks, while firmly handling overly aggressive members. It is important to allow differences to surface and to make sure that all sides have an opportunity to air their opinions, without any one person or faction controlling discussion. The chairperson also needs to keep the group centered on the agenda item currently being considered, structuring discussion to move from clarifying information through options and on to definite decisions. This takes a good sense of timing—knowing when to expand and explain and when to proceed ahead toward resolution.

At various times, a chairperson should summarize the group's progress and point the way for the next steps in the process. However, chairs also should seek some level of agreement from the overall group and not impose

their own definitions on situations. It is not sufficient to know where to move next and how best to solve particular problems. Chairpeople also must be sensitive to group members' feelings, and draw on their expertise whenever possible. All this requires a careful balance between participation and control, attention to group processes, and task-oriented leadership.

The interplay of these variables is most apparent when an *action meeting* is held by a large group to confront a target. Demands can be made by the leadership at the front or from key members sitting in the audience. Either way, the crowd should be involved as participants who actively help apply maximum pressure on the opponent sitting on the "hot seat." Meeting attendees never should be made to feel like passive spectators. Often, the demands can be listed on poster board with "yes" and "no" boxes, which are checked as the target responds.

Obviously, the crowd can help extract concessions by supporting the demands, giving personal testimony, chanting, and otherwise mixing it up with the target. Unsatisfactory responses can lead to an immediate direct action, as when the organization marches over to the mayor's house after growing impatient with an uncooperative appointed bureaucrat. In other cases, the target may be "dismissed," after which the leadership suggests a more militant direct-action tactic. All action meetings should be feisty, lively affairs where members directly can experience their collective power, rather than simply watching their leaders take on opponents.

As any meeting comes to an end (timeliness is very important here), the chairperson needs to define and explain what comes next and how this will be accomplished. Ideally, the next event should be scheduled right at that time, so that the maximum number of people have both input in and information about the decision. Follow-up responsibilities should be divided clearly and publicly whenever possible. Everyone should leave with a clear sense of achievement and mission. It is not too early to start preparing and organizing for the next event. However, all this should be done amongst some celebration, fun, and socializing as the meeting comes to an end. People should relax, have a good time, and enjoy themselves.

Often, but not always, there is a tendency for the top leaders to stay the longest, discussing the results and planning for the future. Systematic evaluation (discussed in Chapter 5) may be undertaken at this point, or simply scheduled for a future meeting. Regardless, it is a good time for the leadership to begin reflecting on what happened, their own roles in it, and what should be done the same way or differently in the future. It is important to create an atmosphere in which success can be celebrated and constructive criticism can be made in a nonthreatening manner. Leaders should emerge recommitted and energized for the next step in the organizing process.

There also should be reminders and follow-up support for those who volunteer for various tasks before or at the next event. Often, a written list of

these responsibilities helps both to remind the volunteers and to tighten up their commitment to follow through on their assignments. A record that everyone in the organization can see does wonders for helping members keep the promises they have made. It is also important to communicate with the new people who came to the meeting. Their impressions and ideas should be sought, and they should be recruited to come to the next event, perhaps to play an even greater role. Finally, someone should contact those who were expected to attend but missed the meeting. The person should let them know what they missed and start organizing them to turn out next time. One thing is for sure: there always will be another meeting.

MAKING CHANGE WITH COINS

It has become fashionable for a broad array of public and private sector organizations to assert their commitment to community involvement and empowerment. The list includes hospitals, neighborhood health centers, social service bureaucracies, institutions of higher learning, and public and private schools. Yet, despite a proliferation of partnerships, collaborations, community initiatives, citizen advisory boards, and task forces, the rhetoric of community and consumer empowerment often far exceeds the day-to-day reality experienced by community members who interact with these institutions. Some organizations prefer to “talk the talk” rather than “walk the walk” of genuine power sharing. Others have a sincere desire to work in partnership, but lack the knowledge, skills, cultural competence, and organizational resources to do so effectively. Regardless of intent, clumsy efforts to work collaboratively with grassroots community organizations can leave members and leaders feeling like they’ve been tokenized and co-opted, functioning as “junior partners,” rather than as equals in a joint endeavor.

When this happens, GCOs usually *react* to the situation, demanding institutional changes in attitudes and behaviors. While relations between organized community members and the institutions they utilize can be expected to require continual adjustment as the parties interact, GCOs should not settle for relationships of perpetual confrontation. It is reasonable and realistic to insist that organizations providing health care, education, and human services *operate with a significant degree of **institutional responsibility and accountability** to the communities where they sit and the consumers/users whom they serve.* When genuine two-way relationships of mutual respect exist, authentic partnership is possible, paving the way for productive community development programs, projects, and activities.

Institutions that become sufficiently responsive and answerable to communities and consumers essentially are accepting their appropriate