



Center for Participatory Change

...helping people across Western North Carolina recognize their own power, work together, and transform their communities

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Building Blocks of Strong Grassroots Organizations

The Center for Participatory Change supports grassroots groups across the mountains of Western North Carolina. From our work with grassroots leaders, CPC staff have identified eight core elements that are needed for any grassroots group to be successful. These building blocks of strong grassroots organizations can help a group understand the big picture of their development, solve problems, and set priorities for learning and action.

1. Relationships and Fun.

Strong grassroots groups are ones where members like each other and have fun together. Group members find ways to enjoy their work, enjoy their relationships, and celebrate. When this happens, members don't get burned out, conflict is handled without meanness, and folks get more out of their work than they put into it. Keys here are fulfillment, energy, caring, relationships, trust, laughter, joking....

Recommendations: Take the time to recognize good work, honor the sacrifices people make, and celebrate your group's successes! Treat every person with respect, all the time, especially when you disagree. Earn each other's trust. Don't sacrifice fun or relationships to 'get things done'—it won't pay off in the long run.

2. Values.

The power and passion of grassroots organizations often spring from the values that members share: what they believe in, their overall purpose for doing their work, and the sense of fulfillment they get from their work. Strong grassroots groups have a good fit between members' values and those of the organization. Group members reflect on their values, lift them up, and build their work from these beliefs.

Recommendations: Spend time talking about what you deeply believe in, what moves you. Write down the group's shared values, and use these to keep you grounded in what's really important. Ask partners, donors and funders to hold you accountable to your values.

3. Mission and Vision.

Mission and vision statements drive a grassroots group's work. A mission statement clarifies why a group exists and what its purpose is. A vision statement lays out the ideal world that a group is working to create. In a strong grassroots group, all of the group's work is built upon its mission and vision.

Recommendations: Develop a mission and vision that are clear, inspiring—and easy to remember! Use these as your 'yardstick' to measure whether projects, partners, and funding sources are a good fit. Check your mission and vision every two years to see if they still fit your values and your work.

4. Community Work.

This refers to the planning and carrying out of specific programs or projects (e.g., a farmers' market, after school program, advocacy campaign, workers' rights workshop). A group's community work is the reason that many members join the group. Through its community work, a grassroots group makes its community a better place to live. The projects and activities of grassroots groups are a major force in shaping communities.

Recommendations: Do a 'work assessment' by listing all your projects and activities and asking tough questions: Which ones best fit our mission, vision and values? What are our top priorities? Do we have the resources (time, money, people) to do them properly? How can we make our work more effective?

5. Building the Organization.

Often a grassroots group will get so busy with its community work that it becomes hard to find time to grow the organization. Strong grassroots groups pay attention to issues such as how members make decisions, what the group's structure is (officers, committees, board of directors?), how members deal with conflict, how the group runs its meetings, whether the group has the policies and procedures in place that it needs, and so on.

Recommendations: Make sure every member knows the basics of how your organization functions—what the different roles are, how decisions are made, how leaders are selected, and so on. Organizations tend to get complicated, so try to clarify, simplify and focus.

6. Resources.

Resources include the materials, time, skills, and money that a grassroots organization needs to do its work. A strong group will have: a budget that outlines how much money the group needs (and for what), a fundraising plan to find money and donations; and strong financial management and record keeping systems.

Recommendations: Plan what you will actually need to do your work and build your organization. Look for volunteers and materials as hard as you look for dollars. Prioritize finding sources that can provide sustainable, long-term support: local donors and fundraising events, rather than grants.

7. Networks and Partnerships.

A strong grassroots organization works closely with other organizations. Some of these other organizations support a group's work by providing expertise or funding; others are partners that work with a group to carry out projects together. No grassroots group is an island....

Recommendations: Look for partnerships that are mutually beneficial. Evaluate each relationship by comparing what your group puts into it (time, energy, money) to what you get out of it (ideas, inspiration, volunteers, resources). Which networks and partnerships are really helping you reach your mission? What needs do you have that aren't being met, and who could help?

8. Growth and Learning.

A strong grassroots group continually develops new knowledge, learns from its work, and reflects on what it is doing. This area includes understanding group development, building skills in trainings and workshops, leadership development, structured reflection sessions, program evaluation, and so on.

Recommendations: Get your group in the habit of reflection, always asking, "What works? What can be better?" for meetings, projects, fundraisers, everything. Evaluating each of these eight building blocks also provides an opportunity for a group to reflect on its development and become stronger.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

