New Brunswick Environmental Network 2011

Your Environmental Issue: Getting from Problem to Solution

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français

Original version published 1994

Citizens start environmental groups because they see a need. Some groups form gradually over months or years; others are created almost instantaneously to meet a crisis. In either case, some degree of organizing, analysis, and strategizing will need to take place before a group can respond to an issue.

Some people find getting organized quite daunting. But as Julia Chadwick, formerly with the Friends of the Petitcodiac, notes:

> *"Organizing is something most of us have been involved with in one way or another — it can range from getting together with neighbours over coffee to plan a block barbecue to developing a plan of action to oppose an unwanted development or achieve a desired one."*

This section of the NBEN training kit is about:
- getting organized
- analyzing the problem
- developing an action strategy
- implementing the plan
- evaluating success

These five elements are interrelated, part of a continuum: as time goes on, conditions change, information changes, and therefore strategies and actions will need to change as well.

CONTINUUM FOR ACTION

This section examines each component in this continuum.

Getting Organized

Structure or be free....

Some citizen groups are highly structured — everything laid out in detail through legal incorporation, a constitution, and by-laws. Other groups dispense with formality and have rotating chairpersons and an open forum for discussion. They pass no resolutions or take no actions. There are advantages and disadvantages to each approach. For citizen groups handling money or engaging in action a totally unstructured set-up has dangers. Lack of structure can make it difficult to establish formal group policy and to determine who speaks on behalf of the group. It can fail to provide a procedure for settling conflicts among members. It makes handling the group's finances more difficult.

But too much structure may restrict the scope of an organization's work. For example, if the organization is given a limited purpose in its constitution as, "to organize and present objections to the waste dump in Spencer County," then the group gives itself a limited mandate to work on larger issues such as waste reduction, resource conservation, or land use planning. Formal structure also requires time and energy to maintain: in small groups this may detract from work on the issues. Each group will need to find the right balance be-

Rick Green, author of Getting People Together had this to say about when to quit:

"First of all, keep firmly in mind that there is no reflection on a group or its members if they decide the group no longer serves a purpose. It may be much better for active people involved in their community to move on to other challenges. Self-evaluation by a group should be a continuing thing, and when that evaluation says it's time to quit, don't fight it."

tween too much structure and none at all.

A final note on structure. Some groups will face the question, "Should we quit or carry on?" at some time in their existence — some groups face it quite frequently.

Decision-making processes

At some point, your organization will need to make decisions about the *what, where, when, and how* of proposed activities. There are many types of decision-making process: simple majority, two-thirds majority, consensus, even benevolent dictatorship. Your organization's choice will depend upon your members and the structure of your organization. New groups may find it useful to keep flexible until you can see what method best helps the group meet its goals.

The most common method of organizational decision-making is majority rule. This is conventional "parliamentary-style" democracy: one person, one vote with decisions made either by a simple majority or some larger percentage. Meetings are conducted according to recognized parliamentary rules of order.

Most of us have some familiarity with majority rule process. We may be less familiar with consensus, a decision-making method that is receiving a great deal of attention. Essentially, consensus aims to get total agreement on actions from all the participants who have declared a stake in an issue. Groups use variations of pure consensus decision-making and it is not unusual to hear federal and provincial governments talk about consensus when discussing the process they used (or will use) to make decisions regarding some social, eco-

nomic, and environmental issues. In this context, the term is used to indicate a process of participation that encourages dialogue and, to a varying degree, problem-solving between organizations or stakeholders with different values, goals, and agendas. In 1993, the Canadian Round Tables published a booklet, Building Consensus for a Sustainable Future, outlining ten guiding principles for consensus processes and, in 1996, a guide-book, Putting Principles into Practice, for putting those principles into action. These principles can be viewed as rules for participation and achieving agreement between members within a group, as well as between organizations.

In its broadest intention, consensus process can encourage individuals to share their knowledge and expertise thereby creating an atmosphere for creative and innovative solutions to emerge. But like any process, it takes practice to make it work properly. A group can opt to use a consensus process for problem-identification and solving but use another form of decision-making (e.g., 2/3 majority) to make decisions. There are some key points to keep in mind when practising some form of consensus decision-making. Figure 1 outlines these key points.

In either majority rule or consensus, it is important for the group to decide its quorum, the minimum number of people required to initiate a vote or to make a decision. The greater the quorum, the broader the potential input to decision-making. The bottom line regarding decision-making is that everyone in the group needs to be aware and informed as to how decisions are made. An open and effective decision-making process will help to develop accountability and build a strong organization.

Figure 1. Consensus Decision-Making

1. The chair ensures that no one speaks twice until everyone has had a chance to speak once to the issue.

2. Resolutions are recorded as they emerge.

3. Each resolution statement is read back to the group.

4. Test for consensus (or agreement) by asking if there is any opposition (blocks) to accepting the resolution.

5. If there is a block to consensus, the resolution does not go forward as a decision unless the individual(s) blocking consensus agree to proceed.

Analyzing the Problem

Organization takes time. While your group is getting organized, it will also be analyzing the problem that has brought everyone together. This requires an understanding of the circumstances that led up to the problem and what barriers your group faces in getting something done about the problem.

Problem identification and goal-setting takes practice. The identification of a problem can be based on a direct observation or knowledge, a belief, a judgement, an assumption, or on all four elements. A problem statement that gives recognition to a wide range of insights about the issue will help to build community support and draw support from other groups.

Case Study
Petitcodiac River Causeway
In 1992, the provincial government announced that the gates in the causeway across the Petitcodiac River would remain closed. This action prompted local interest groups, ranging from church-basement organizations to sportsmen's associations, to get together, with the support of larger provincial-level groups, and outline all the reasons the government decision should be reversed.

Underlying the process was the conviction that the causeway gates could be opened to restore the free flow of the Petitcodiac River and that this would ultimately benefit everyone in communities from Anagance to Shepody Bay. The groups involved shared a common conviction: they were no longer prepared to watch the river be destroyed, and they were convinced that the more people who learned about what was happening to the river, the more support opening the gates would obtain.

Defining the problem / issue

Problems are a recognition of an unsatisfying reality (e.g. forest clearcuts, water contamination, toxic waste, habitat destruction, etc.) and a diagnosis of its causes (e.g., inappropriate resource management, industrial effluent, unrestricted development, etc.). Goals are a declaration of certain values (e.g., protecting human health, protecting a species or habitat, etc.) and a call to action (e.g., preventing further contamination or habitat loss, enforcing regulations, opening the causeway gates, establishing nature reserves, etc.).

Broadening participation in the process of identifying the problem/issue and setting goals is important:

Your Environmental Issue: Getting from Problem to Solution

- When it comes to generating ideas, a dozen heads may be better than one, two or three heads;
- It can help build relationships between members, a sense of belonging and ownership, and ultimately contribute to the sustainability of the organization;
- Wide participation lessens the likelihood of one person's agenda dominating the group's goals and decisions.

Brainstorming

One useful tool in facilitating participation is brainstorming. The theory behind brainstorming is that imagination and judgement are two distinct processes. Imagination should be given free rein to produce ideas before judgement is brought onto the scene. Brainstorming helps to define the scope of your group's knowledge, assumptions, beliefs, and judgements. It can help the group assess gaps in knowledge, identify priority actions, and identify its allies. It can also help to divide a problem into manageable pieces. Brainstorming utilizes all the resources of the group.

In brainstorming, recording ideas is crucial. Have a designated "recorder" and use a flip chart. Define some parameters for the brainstorming to help people focus their thinking and imagination. For example, if your group is dealing with groundwater contamination you may want to know: who is affected? what is the geographic scope of the contamination? what are the possible sources of contamination? who is responsible for groundwater monitoring? what do we know about the legislation regarding the issue? who can we invite to help us with this problem?

what are people saying about the problem? what are the effects of contamination? how might the problem be solved?

Case Study
Petitcodiac River Causeway
    The groups involved looked at

Rules of Brainstorming

1. Set a time limit
2. Designate someone to record the ideas
3. Outline some questions that need to be answered
4. List all the thoughts, ideas, and information presented
5. Do not discuss them (expanding on someone's idea is ok)
6. Do not judge or criticize
7. Repetitions are ok (mark the repetitions or jot them down again)
8. Once all of the ideas are on the flip chart, begin developing strategies.

---

how the decision to keep the Petitcodiac River shackled could be made in the first place and where the blockages to opening the gates and restoring the river were based. They identified the people they needed to bring on-side in their efforts to get government to change its mind. These are the questions that needed to be answered:

1. What is the habitat problem?
2. Who created the problem?
3. What conditions exist which allowed the situation to develop?
4. Who needs to act to resolve the problem?
5. Where is the political blockage?

According to Janice Harvey, lecturer at University of New Brunswick and former Executive Director of the Conservation Council of New Brunswick:

*"Whatever the project, you must determine who has the ability to block what you want to do. This is knowing the **power of others** — know thy enemy. In order to make something happen, you have to build a power base of your own. Power can be a positive thing if you empower yourself and others.*

*The **power of one** can be positive; people need to take responsibility. Individuals can be role models, provide leadership, and inspiration. But it can also be dangerous. If one person takes all the responsibility, then it disempowers others in the group and essentially, 'lets them off the hook'. It can also lead to the personalization of the issue which leads to the risk of alienation. There will be a lack of broad ownership of the issue, which can mean a lack of long-term sustainability. And when the individual goes, the effort goes. This is a very important issue to consider."*

6. Where are the resources needed to drive resolution?

They identified the people they needed to bring on-side in order to get government to change its mind. Their targets included the general public, nature and wildlife groups, provincial and municipal politicians, and international groups such as the Gulf of Maine Council.

Research

In many cases, if the information your group needs is not readily available, your group will need to do its own research. Extend your process of information gathering to your community or other organizations that may have an interest in the issue. This can be done using several techniques including:

- Forming citizens' committees, task forces, panels, or councils to research information on specific issues;
- Holding public meetings, workshops, or forums that seek information and input on specific issues; and
- Mailing or emailing questionnaires and surveys to, or having one-on-one discussions with, individuals that may never come to meetings or participate on committees.

These methods can also be used to determine public opinion, attitudes, and values regarding proposed solutions. Enlisting the knowledge and support of community members can also help to build public and community awareness and support for your work.

Power

Building a power base is about creating influence and credibility in your community, with the public-at-large, and with bureaucrats and politicians. Take the time to develop your own power and the power of your group. Janice Harvey identifies the following power tools:

Developing a Strategy

POWER TOOLS

KNOWLEDGE: Focus your attention on the information you need to be credible to your audience. Make sure your group knows what it is talking about and it has gathered evidence to support its position. Plan your actions to enhance your credibility. You will gain respect (even grudgingly), if you know what you are talking about. If you slip up — even once — you will lose the ear of all kinds of people.

THE PUBLIC: Work towards building public support. Avoid alienating people. However, it is important not to compromise your goals. You don't have to dilute your message. Keep your ear to the ground in the public sense. Listen to what the public is saying and understand why they are saying it.

ANALYSIS: Know the system you are working within, whether it is a school, the government, or a corporation. Discover what moves that system. You have to learn to interact with that system. Your task is to broaden the view of the political and social system you are working within. Most importantly, you must understand the real problem; analyze it thoroughly. This point is often ignored.

STRATEGY: There is a whole range of strategic options. If you have the right problem and the right solution, but the wrong strategy, you may risk alienating the public. These days, we do have to have a bottom line. The end does not necessarily justify the means.

There are two questions that need to be answered in order for a plan of action to unfold:

- **What are your group's goals regarding the issue?**
- **How will you achieve these goals?**

What are your goals?

Once you have generated a list which may include needs, concerns, desires, problems, issues, and even solutions, categorize your ideas under common themes and begin rephrasing them in terms of **direction and destination** — what do you hope to achieve? where will these ideas take you? Make sure your goals are statements of what you realistically can accomplish with the resources you have.

Goals are statements of what the group wants to achieve. They turn information and recognized issues/problems into action items. Goals set the stage for clarifying tasks, calculating timetables, and deciding on actions. They are also used to measure the success of completed actions.

A pitfall of goal setting is being too vague. Goals should be specific: to open the gates in the causeway across the Petitcodiac River; to develop a coastal land trust program; to prevent the development of a quarry.

How will you achieve these goals?

Once you have defined the important facts regarding an issue/problem and identified the key issues and goals, your group is ready to consider a spectrum of actions. (Don't forget to assess and determine your base of support and the power structure around an issue.) These actions could include media campaigns, public speaking tours, rallies or protests, political involvement, civil disobedience, policy papers, guerilla theatre, research, or "going to the top" through lobbying. Use the brainstorming method for each goal and allow yourselves the luxury of having a large supply of actions to choose from.

Your group will need to evaluate or rank the various options they have identified. It is possible that some of the action items can not be undertaken by your group because of the time, money, volunteers, or support required. Your group will need some type of criteria to evaluate each action:

Responsibility — Is there a potential individual or group, other than yours, that could take responsibility for implementing an action? This information should have surfaced during public involvement and issue-analysis activities. Is there an existing private or public institution that can implement an action? Is there legislation that relates to this action?

Supportability — How many community or interest groups are likely to support this option? Would the general public, environmentalists, business owners, and town officials support the option? Information gained through public involvement and problem assessment will help to determine this factor.

Effectiveness — To what extent is the option likely to be successful? Will it meet the needs? How well has this option worked elsewhere? Has it worked under similar conditions? Research into examples of what other communities have done will be useful.

Timing — How quickly will you need to act to address the problem or issues? Which options will produce quick results? Which options will be more effective in the long run? It is important to set a balance between long-term and short-term options.

Feasibility — How much would the implementation of this option cost, both in human and financial resources? Are funding sources available? How much time and effort would this option require? How practical is it?

Lobbying

Upon evaluating the options, your group may find that letting your politician know what you think about an issue is very important to advancing your goals. Here are eight tips for effective lobbying from the Canadian Labour Congress's handbook, *Campaign Organizing in Your Community:*

1. **Stick to the subjects your group is knowledgeable about.** This is where your research and information gathering will be useful.

2. **Face to face is best.** Do your talking in person rather than by phone or correspondence. Telephone meetings make it too easy to be put onto someone else and letters can be misplaced or forgotten. Politicians are people so relax and get comfortable. Mention mutual friends or acquaintances, ease into the subject.

3. **Don't lobby alone.** But don't take a large group either. Two or three people is about right. The ideal situation is if each member in your delegation can speak to one aspect of the issue, e.g. the science, the legislation, the community, etc.

4. **Be prepared and informative.** Assume that the politician has not yet made up his or her mind, even if you know they have. Have your analysis written down. Leave them with something to read. Bring any press clippings, letter of support, etc.

5. **Be polite and persistent.** Rudeness just gives politicians a reason to ignore you. Politeness will also be appreciated by your non-partisan allies. But be persistent. There is nothing wrong with repeating yourself. Just try and do it a little differently each time.

6. **Don't get distracted.** Politicians know how to change the subject, especially when they are on the defensive. Ask them directly (and keep pressing): "Is this an important issue for you?"; "Is there any information you need that may influence your decision?"; "Are you convinced that there is no better way to deal with this issue?"; "Will you attend a public meeting to explain your position?".

7. **Follow up directly.** After your meeting write a letter expressing your thanks for the person's time and outlining your understanding of the meeting. Restate your group's position if necessary. Indicate that your letter is being circulated.

8. **Follow up indirectly.** Have other organizations write follow-up letters expressing disappointment with (or praise for) the person's position. If they are not already aware of the meeting, tell the media about it.

Implementing and Evaluating your Action Plan

Who, how, and when

Once your group has selected its action(s), draw up an agenda of by whom, how, and when tasks will be carried out. Good organizing means dividing up the work so everyone in the group participates in the action plan.

WHO will take responsibility for initiating and implementing the action?
One group could take the lead role, or the work could be shared among a number of groups or individuals. If no firm commitment to take a leadership role exists, consider ways of generating interest in carrying out this action in the future, rather than immediately.

HOW will the action be taken?
Break the action into main components. For example, developing support for a sustainable agriculture project could involve meeting with local farmers, fundraising, preparing a portable display for public information sessions, and organizing workshops.

WHEN will the action be taken?
Sometimes a fixed deadline is approaching that will determine your time frame. For instance, a public consultation/hearing date may be scheduled for a landfill site. In other cases, you may need to know only that a given action such as a water quality monitoring program or a wildlife inventory should be accomplished within the next year or by the end of the following summer. Perhaps one action will begin only after another is completed. These time frames provide a general guide for planning your work.

Determining the sequence of events

Organizing your time, resources, and people is necessary to make actions come to life. Not every action or event requires a detailed list of tasks, but in many cases a complex project becomes more manageable when broken down into smaller pieces.

An action agenda outlines a framework for taking actions in a logical sequence. An effective action agenda will show the scope of your activities both short- and long-term (e.g. writing press releases versus applying for funding).

What you can do to get started is to make lists of everything and everyone you will need as part of the major actions. These lists can be arranged on a time-line by days, weeks, or months and ordered in a logical sequence. People can be assigned to tasks and deadlines can be set for each step. (see Action Agenda)

Follow-up

Each action will generate its own momentum, and its success will sometimes be difficult to evaluate objectively. It is important to keep track of your progress to be sure that you are accomplishing your goals. Are you meeting your time frame? Are the responsible parties continuing to carry out their actions? Should responsibilities be shifted or shared with other groups? Are you gaining support? If not, why not?

While monitoring your work, it is also important to continue to publicize your efforts with an eye towards continuously expanding your base of support. Periodic public events — an annual festival around your group's vision, a slide show, a clean-up day, article in the newspaper — are a good way to achieve this purpose. These events also serve as a way to celebrate your progress. And remember, fundraising events (raffles, bake sales, auctions, etc) serve dual functions: raise money

Action Agenda — Example

Action	Who	How	When
Developing support for a sustainable agriculture project	People for a Better Planet	Meeting with local farmers	Late winter – before planting starts
	People for a Better Planet and United Against Pollution	fundraising	Start in the spring, ongoing through the fall
	Jane Smith and John Jones	Organizing workshops	Spring & summer
	Jane Smith	preparing a portable display for public information sessions	Summer – to be ready for local harvest festivals in the fall

for your group and publicize the group's work.

In the end ...

It is possible that your group may not achieve the goals it has defined. But in the process something much larger can happen.

Julia Chadwick, formerly with the Friends of the Petitcodiac talks about community organizing:

> *"In the end, what the Friends of the Petitcodiac are working towards is much larger than our goal of opening the gates in the causeway on the Petitcodiac River. We are helping to create a community where people expect to have a say in how decisions are made that affect them. The Friends of the Petitcodiac have given citizens a greater understanding of the Petitcodiac and the importance of rivers in general. From that perspective, community organizing is a no-lose process. Even if the direct goal is not obtained, the community as a whole benefits from a greater base of knowledge and understanding."*