RUNNING AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY GROUP

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1. WHO ARE THE LEADERS IN OUR COMMUNITY?

Within community groups there are many active citizens who provide strong leadership and advocacy for those who are least represented. **They are common people with uncommon values, who play a critical role in maintaining healthy and effective communities by mobilising others towards shared goals, and facilitating the collaboration of diverse stakeholder groups**. Leaders often work in a voluntary capacity, outside formal structures and lacking resources. They are resilient and will not abandon projects in the face of adversity, instead using their passion, enthusiasm and sense of responsibility to persevere. They may work within the system or build alternatives in order to challenge prevailing practices and situations.

There may not always be one individual within a group who acts as a leader, but instead many individuals may provide leadership to the group at different times. Group members may move in and out of leadership roles, and adopt different leadership approaches at various times and places. Leadership is not a sole activity; it involves the participation and cooperation of others. Community leaders work with and through other people, empowering or enabling others to act.

2. WHAT MOTIVATES COMMUNITY LEADERS?

Leadership within community groups is usually driven by strong personal values based on social justice and giving back to the community. Community leaders often experience a great deal of personal fulfilment through their role. As well as the excitement and satisfaction of achieving their goals and improving their community, they may build networks and friendships, develop personally and experience opportunities for learning. They seldom have the goal of becoming a leader, but instead get involved and continue to be involved due to their passion for the cause.

3. WHAT DO LEADERS DO?

As there are a broad range of different community groups in Queensland, there are also a broad range of leadership styles. These can range from Visionary (articulating a vision and demonstrating links to this vision) and Democratic (generating trust and commitment by using the ideas of others) to Commanding (giving directions) and Pace-setting (setting standards and aiming to work better and faster).

In general, collaborative leadership is the most effective management style for small community groups. **Collaborative leaders inspire commitment and action by bringing together all interested parties, designing processes that allow people to work together, facilitating their interactions and sustaining hope and participation when the going gets tough. They act more as catalysts than problem solvers, working with those around them to solve issues rather than to deliver a particular solution**.

4. HOW CAN I BE AN EFFECTIVE LEADER?

Effective leaders usually focus on achieving the following goals for their group:

Vision

Build a passionate consensus around the opinions and values of community members. There may be disagreement about some of the group's priorities, however community leaders should facilitate this process of building a common vision through respectful negotiation and listening to all members. The vision should be grounded in people's combined experiences, reflect their wisdom and concerns, and point toward a more rewarding future. Link roles and projects to the vision and values of the group and communicate these in familiar language and terms.

Collaboration

Encourage others to use their abilities to their potential, and connect people to each other, to information and to their community. Instead of power over people, community leaders should aim for power to the people. Leaders support community collaboration by embracing difference and building connections to facilitate their joint work. Conflict should be brought to light and addressed as a mutual problem to be solved in collaboration.

Empowerment

Prepare others to lead and provide them with opportunities to do so, value the contributions of others and honour community knowledge. Leaders support the community to take ownership of issues and recognise its own capacity to create change. Foster opportunities for collective learning and knowledge sharing. Be transparent, open and sharing, as well as seeking feedback on your leadership practices and reflecting on it. Model the way you expect others to act. Recognise the achievements and contributions of others and celebrate successes in a spirit of community.

Delegation

A range of systems and strategies are needed to ensure work is shared, not just left to an inner core of people while those outside feel inadequately skilled or involved to take up key roles. Avoid doing everything yourself (the little red hen syndrome) and encourage a variety of people to engage in leadership acts as well as taking on action roles to get the job done. Instead of formal delegation, use personal suggestion and influence to encourage specific people to take on particular roles. Delegate roles and projects rather than tasks, and avoid prescribing how the work is to be done in order to empower participants: focus on the end result but let people use their own means. Only delegate to people who already have 70% of the skills to do the role, and include specific report back mechanisms and timelines.

Innovation

Leaders challenge assumptions and create space for others to do the same, reframing issues, proposing new solutions and exposing dominant frames that underlie existing approaches to problems. Leave the means of achieving values and solutions open to negotiation, embrace uncertainty and disorganisation, encourage information sharing and engage with many diverse actors in the community to allow new and different ideas to develop.

5. WHAT ARE SOME BASIC STRATEGIES FOR RUNNING AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY GROUP?

Purpose

Agree on a clear vision, what you are aiming to achieve and how you plan to go about it, as well as acceptable and unacceptable behaviours in your group. This will focus people's energies, provide a unifying goal of the future you want to create, inspire people and maintain their passion.

Planning

Develop a clear and practical plan to achieve this vision and act on it. It does not have to be a long document, it just needs to list the key outcomes for that year and how you will achieve these, who is responsible for each task, when they need to be done and how you will measure their success. See *Handbook 4* for more information on strategic planning.

Ensure meaningful & engaged involvement

Community groups are sustainable only if they can effectively use all their resources, especially the passionate people who become involved. Volunteer roles need to be complementary, clear, and based on trust and personal connection. It is critical to share the load through forming task groups, buddying, role sharing, succession planning, developing a skills register, and delegating roles.

Balance the formal & the informal

Within an effective community group there need to be clear boundaries, definitions of roles and responsibilities, lines of responsibility, accountability and documentation. There also need to be adequate systems, processes, reporting mechanisms and policy, especially in key areas in which there is risk for people or the group. **However, it is also essential to maintain the informal nature of relationships built on trust and respect, keep it fun and remember why people joined the group in the first place**. Consider if your group culture has become too serious for passionate people, or if you encourage individual creativity, initiative, fun and innovation. Ensure the language used is not too unfriendly or bureaucratic and don't get carried away with structure – start with the skills and capacity you already have to work with and don't take it all too seriously.

Balance the day-to-day & the long term

As your group will be faced with an array of pressing issues and potential actions, you will need to focus on the important as well as the urgent. This can be achieved through developing a strategic plan for your group and prioritising tasks that take into account your current group size and resources, so that you can do a few things well without over-committing. Your effectiveness will depend on staying in touch with the changing nature of the sector, planning, budgeting, fundraising, and developing staff and systems, which can get overlooked in the face of urgent business.

Understand your external environment

Research others who are concerned with your issue and what they are doing: these are potential partners and sponsors. Investigate the trends which impact on your group from the wider world, including government policy and funding guidelines, demographic changes, social trends and values and legal decisions. Determine how you can maximise the benefits of these external issues and minimise the challenges, how can you alter your work or actively resist the impact of changes. Access formal and informal methods of support, maximise networks and look outside traditional volunteer resources.

Understand & work with group culture & styles

Group culture includes how people communicate verbally and non-verbally, how the group views the world, the stories told, who is included in the group and who is outside, the unwritten code of conduct, problem solving approaches and dealing with conflict. **Groups need to recognise and work with their own culture, know what they can and can't do, when to say no, when the group style is causing problems and when to challenge it**.

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6. HOW CAN WE BEST COMMUNICATE WITH OUR MEMBERS & THE WIDER COMMUNITY?

It is vital to communicate effectively with all members of your group and the wider community. **Based on your vision, consider who are the major stakeholders and ensure they are up to date with your actions and achievements.** Stay in contact with your members and network through using a regular mailing list, newsletter or e-newsletter. Also consider emails and updates to the broader community, for example other community groups and potential sponsors. You may need to think outside the box depending on your target audience, using strategies such as letterbox drops, posters, community meetings, events or articles in local school magazines, politician bulletins or interest magazines.

7. HOW CAN WE ENSURE OUR GROUP IS HERE TO STAY?

In order to ensure the ongoing survival of your group, you need to build long-term planning and sustainability into everyday group decisions. Plan for succession so that information is not lost if key members leave: develop sub-projects, deputies and committees. Leadership is an acquired skill learned on the job under the guidance of mentors. Work on engaging and retaining people outside of the group's inner circle. Document your work, contacts and processes so that information is not lost. Provide clear and concise job descriptions, organised documentation, and clear policies and procedures on governance. Determine which existing members have the capacity to become leaders, their skills and their level of willingness to participate. Take breaks and time for yourself, and share the load with others. Ensure leadership selection is a clear and transparent process.