

# Ask EcoGirl

By Patricia Dines

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## Encouraging Sane Group Dynamics

**Dear EcoGirl:** I want to work with other folks on eco-issues, but community groups can be so fraught with difficult personal dynamics. Does it just have to be that way? Or how can we create more enjoyable and productive experiences? *Signed, Agitated*

**Dear Agitated:** Thanks for your great question. I too have wrestled with this issue, and certainly don't have all the answers. However, I think I can add some useful thoughts to the conversation, based on my various experiences and lessons learned over the years.

### The Underlying Opportunity & Challenge

First, I very much understand the urge to just avoid group difficulties and conflicts, and sometimes that's the right choice for an individual.

However, I think it's also important that we overall seek to find and nurture functional community groups. That's because they're uniquely positioned to play a key role in steering us away from today's looming catastrophes, by offering us a way to multiply our power, develop fresh ideas, prioritize community benefits, and have fewer constraints.

But this freedom does bring its challenges. That's understandable given that these groups are taking on vast objectives while being powered by volunteers with diverse personalities, motivations, and approaches to conflict. Groups also feel pressure to quickly get results and meet individuals' needs so that people stick around. This can all predictably lead to impatience and conflict.

Thus, I think it's vital that, as we participate on the wild and creative front lines of change, we seek to not only generate new realities in our topic areas, but also to find healthier ways of working together, integrat-

ing diverse styles, and constructively resolving conflict.

### Key Solutions

So how do we do this? Here are a few suggested ways for people in groups to avoid and address negative dynamics:

#### 1) Empathize with individuals' different responses to these challenges.

For instance, people might try to brush issues under the rug, even as they keep flaring up; seek to solve them according to their own style, even as it differs from another's style; retreat and blame others for that; or feel defeated and discouraged. These are reasonable responses, though with varying usefulness.

2) Explore how the group can create positive structures to channel people's energies and constructively address and avoid conflict. It's best if a leader doesn't unilaterally impose their personal style, even covertly, as this causes resistance. However, they can propose operating principles that encourage positive group dynamics, and invite discussion about them. This helps de-personalize differences and keep the focus on developing an effective shared approach. A leader can also create a safe space for negotiating different needs and styles, and welcome people's different skills to the group's process.

3) Encourage core group members to know each other personally. This can be as simple as going around the room and asking each person to describe their work in the world, connection to this topic, and personal goals with this experience. This helps people see and value each other's unique gifts and style.

4) Create a clear and inspiring group goal statement. This helps everyone orient themselves to a shared vision as common ground.

5) Honor people's needs for both feelings/process and action/results. People can often see these desires as conflicting, but a successful group actually requires both. Leaders also tend to prefer one of these styles, leaving the other unaddressed. Thus there needs to be acceptable ways for others to contribute and tend to the missing aspects.

6) Agree to approach breakdowns as an opportunity for team building. Once people can accept conflict as understandable and not blame individuals, they can empathetically get to know each person's style and needs, and together shape the group's working style.

Team building does take some time but ultimately saves time, and pays dividends in happier and more successful group dynamics. It can be done in time-efficient ways — and needs to be, to keep the group feeling productive. However, this approach is saner than just letting conflict tear a group apart.

So those are my thoughts; I hope they're useful. I encourage you to explore the books and articles on this topic. I'm also grateful to the people who've helped my understanding of this. May we all continue to grow together!

*Ask EcoGirl is written by Patricia Dines, Author of The Organic Guides, and Editor and Lead Writer for The Next STEP newsletter. Email your questions about going green to <EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info> for possible inclusion in future columns. Also see "Ask EcoGirl" on Facebook! And contact EcoGirl for information about carrying this syndicated column in your periodical.*

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