

Ask EcoGirl

By Patricia Dines

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Action Groups: The First Meeting

I think that protecting our individual well-being must include regularly taking community-level action. Sometimes that's the most time-efficient approach to a problem, or even the only solution.

We can also help focus and amplify our community-level power through community action groups.

However, people who start action groups often don't realize that doing so requires specific skills. Even folks who are experienced in other aspects of community work can make basic avoidable errors that harm their cause and rebuff interested people.

Over the years, I've been in and observed a variety of groups, experimented with ways to engage and serve, developed various skills, and become better at deciding when to invest my energy.

Through that process, I've realized that much of a group's core dynamics can be observed at the first meeting. So I decided to list the top errors that I often see there, and how we can avoid them. I hope this helps us improve our overall results!

Six Key First Meeting Errors & Their Remedies

1) ERROR: Group leaders don't see the unique challenge, and skills needed, to create a community action group.

REMEDY: Recognize how community action groups differ from other groups, including business teams, support groups, and social groups. The challenge is that community action groups seek to create focused results using random unpaid people who have a wide range of styles, skills, needs, and beliefs. Thus these groups easily get pulled in different directions and break down.

So it's key to develop skills to manage this dynamic, and value the

people who bring these skills to a group.

2) ERROR: Leaders poorly set the stage before the first meeting, decreasing the odds of success.

REMEDY: Prepare your ground beforehand. Talk with interested people, and wait until enough folks want a meeting before setting one up. Then offer an invitation that sets accurate expectations. For instance, don't tell people to bring action ideas then present a long lecture and get angry if attendees dare to "interrupt" by asking questions or requesting a group conversation on strategy.

3) ERROR: Leaders don't structure the meeting for success.

REMEDY: Consider your key desired outcomes for your meeting, and what you'll do to achieve them. So you might start the meeting with a written proposed agenda and goals, and create ways for attendees to efficiently participate in the foundational decision-making.

4) ERROR: Group members don't get a chance to introduce themselves, or do so in long rambling ways.

REMEDY: It's helpful for folks to introduce themselves, if group size allows. But avoid wasted time by giving clear instructions, such as asking folks to speak for only two minutes and say their name, town, and reason for coming.

5) ERROR: Leaders get the group working on one specific task relative to the issue, before there's agreement on the organization's structure, strategy, or priorities.

REMEDY: Realize that attendees often have limited time for community work and are deciding if this group works for them. So they'll want to see key elements of the group's design, including: its goal; if this group will do coordinated action or just networking;

and how decisions and disagreements will be handled.

If these design elements aren't established overtly, competing visions can create conflict. Also, a clear design helps the group come together and proceed in an orderly and friendly way.

6) ERROR: People demean or negate others in the group, insulting their styles, needs, and proposals.

REMEDY: I think a leader's key priority should be establishing and encouraging a safe environment. This isn't about false smiles (and stabbing people in the back), but creating a foundation for coming together.

So folks can: look for things to value in others, care about each others' needs, see the gift of diverse styles, turn complaints into questions and requests, seek common ground, and aim for win/win solutions. Also, make it safe for people to step up and participate, even if their style is different than yours'. And clearly declare personal attacks to be off-limits; their poison blocks the bonds needed to create a team.

For more of my action group tips, see www.askecogirl.info/AEThemeTakingAction.html. I also recommend Starhawk's book, *The Empowerment Manual: A Guide for Collaborative Groups*.

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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Published in the *Sonoma County Gazette*, May 2013.

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