

Sustaining Your Community Organization

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1. Why is this important?

Effective neighborhood associations are organized around the concept of building meaningful and sustainable power in our communities. **To be meaningful**, it has to provide real solutions to real problems, it must involve the people who are impacted in the decision making process, and it must make them aware of their own power. **To be sustainable**, it has to have a formal structure that will live longer than any campaign around a single issue. And this means building powerful community organizations.

Bear in mind that part of managing an effective issue campaign is good management practices. After your campaign is over, you want to leave your community organization stronger than when you started the campaign. If you do, it will serve as a constant reminder to the authorities of your community's power. If your organization is weaker at the end of a campaign, you haven't done your job properly. If your organization goes away after your campaign is over, your community will be right back where it started—struggling with the same issues it has always dealt with.

The work of a neighborhood association is ultimately about power. Power in a community happens at three levels: individual, organization, and community.

2. Neighborhood Association as “Guardian of the Vision”

James Krile identifies three key roles of community leadership: framing ideas; building social capital; and mobilizing resources¹. Leadership of a neighborhood association plays a key role in gathering information from the community, analyzing it, and rearticulating it (or framing, as Krile refers to it).

Guardian of the Vision: One key function of a neighborhood association is to serve as the “Guardian of the Vision.” More than any other agency or group, an effective neighborhood association can play an important role in developing a common vision for the community, and guiding resources and activities that lead to fulfillment of that vision.

1 See Krile, J.F. (2006), *Community Leadership Handbook: Framing Ideas, Building Relationships, and Mobilizing Resources*, Fieldstone Alliance Publishing Center. Also http://www.fieldstonealliance.org/client/tools_you_can_use/02-08-06_cmtly_leadership.cfm

Building Relationships: A successful neighborhood association involves residents and other stakeholders in processes that help identify common interests, establish priorities, resolve barriers to those priorities, and uncover threats to the community interests. The neighborhood association focuses its energies on accomplishing the priorities established by the community.

Every neighborhood association brings people together at a minimum with committee meetings or community hearings, and by bringing people together they start to develop social capital. Effective neighborhood associations go beyond “the meeting” to build relationships. In order to effectively create a true community vision, and to build power at the individual, organization, and community level, the organization promotes healthy relationships in a community by creating safe environments where people can engage one another. Each neighborhood is unique, but common methods might include block clubs and block patrols, community events and festivals, focus groups, and youth programs. Some neighborhood associations have gone further by organizing other activities such as book clubs, car pools, progressive dinners, bicycle clubs, volunteer recognition activities, and many others.

Leaders of neighborhood associations also build relationships with people outside the community. These relationships lead to important partnerships with elected officials and government staff; other community organizations; local businesses; developers; funders; and others.

Mobilizing resources: An effective neighborhood association understands what resources are available, and organizes and mobilizes those resources in order to achieve the goals of the community. Resources might include funds, volunteers, other organizations, information and knowledge, or even just lending the neighborhood association’s support.

3. Before You Start: Know Your Mission!

Does your organization have a Mission Statement? Do you know what it is? It is not only a key guide for your Board, it communicates to the outside world what your organization is about. The Mission Statement should be the starting point of every action your organization takes.

- Make sure everyone in your organization is clear on the Mission and Purpose of your organization. Knowing your mission statement can help provide and maintain focus for your organization’s work and direction, so that you can concentrate energy and resources as effectively as possible.
- Take every opportunity to publicize and promote your mission statement. Place it in newsletters, letterhead, and business cards, pass it out at meetings, print it on poster board and display it in your office and at meetings.
- When evaluating new projects, or reviewing ongoing proposals, the first question should always be: “how does this support our mission and purpose?”
- Regularly review, and, when necessary, revise your mission statement. An organization’s mission statement should not be cast in stone. Many factors, internal and external, may influence the relevance of your mission statement: Times change; the environment changes; your organization changes. It may even be possible that you achieve your mission!

4. Provide and develop leadership

Popular literature contains a multitude of definitions for “leadership,” some good, many bad. For the context of effective community work, leadership can be understood as both the group of individuals who “lead” the organization, as well as the process of leadership. Individuals provide leadership by serving the organization and the community. The “leadership” of an organization collectively provides oversight and guidance. Leadership occurs when leaders interact with the community to identify a common vision and formulate an action plan.

- **Identify and develop potential leaders before you need them.** Effective community groups cultivate new leaders and encourage their participation and ownership in the organization. Leaders can have formal roles in the organization (board chair, board member, committee chair, etc), or informal roles (key contact). Ineffective groups discourage participation and development, sacrificing potential new talent. Be open to new ideas and suggestion, encourage openness and transparency, and provide opportunities for growth and development.
- **Know what needs you have for key leadership positions, such as board members, committee chairs or officers.** Ask if your current leadership is truly representative of the community, what key skills you need, or what gaps in leadership you have. Develop a list of desirable qualities for key positions (such as diversity, special skills or knowledge, etc) and develop a recruitment plan. The best recruitment tool is personal contact.
- **Provide “leadership” by working with the community to develop a common agenda,** not by imposing an agenda on the community. Effective community leadership gathers information from the community, analyzes and interprets the data, and rearticulates the community input into a vision for the community.

The leadership of your organization, in the form of board members and any executive staff, are responsible for governing the organization. Chait, Ryan and Taylor identify three key modes of governance²:

- **Fiduciary:** In its fiduciary role, leadership provides oversight, regularly reviews the work and performance of the organization, corrects course when necessary, and solves problems. In this role, leadership serves as a sentinel; working to ensure that public trust is maintained in the organization.
- **Strategic:** Leadership acts strategically by analyzing the internal and external environments of the organization, developing a planning process, formulating future strategy, and establishing partnerships to carry out the work of the organization. In this role, leadership guides and steers the organization.
- **Generative:** Leadership thinks creatively, interpreting and making sense of all the information at its disposal. Leadership in this role reframes major questions facing the organization, and focuses on learning and understanding. In generative mode, leadership examines the foundations and basic assumptions of the organization.

Leadership occurs as a process of mediating, formulating, and acting on the values and interests of the community. Leadership as a process is contextual, and can be understood as a “social process of change that occurs in a context of conflict and competition.” Here’s why:

² From Chait, Richard P., Ryan, William P. and Taylor, Barbara E (2005). *Governance as Leadership, Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards*. BoardSource. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, Inc. (p. 132)

- **Leadership is contextual.** Good community leaders understand that their role as a leader frequently changes as the environment changes. In some situations, they make changes to the organization in response to environmental factors outside of their control (for example, in response to funding cuts). Their leadership role changes significantly when responding to changes in the community, for example when mediating competing interests within the neighborhood.
- **Understand leadership as a process of change.** Leadership is sometimes confused with “management” or “authority.” However, management is about maintaining the status quo, providing order, and is primarily a rational activity. Authority is about vesting power in a small group or an individual. Leadership is often nonrational, is geared toward change, and is nonroutine³.
- **Community leadership inherently involves conflict and tension.** Every community is made up of people with a diversity of experiences, ideas, cultures, and histories. If we are doing our work properly, we are bringing all those voices to the table. Inevitably, community work will involve mediating competing values and conflicting ideas. Effective leadership accepts this inherent tension, and works for consensus by identifying and reframing underlying issues.

5. Maintain Public Trust

Public trust is the bedrock foundation of any well run nonprofit organization, and this is especially true for neighborhood associations. Community organizations cannot fulfill their mission without the trust and confidence of the communities they serve. The leadership of your organization maintains trust in a variety of ways:

- **Stay true to your mission.** Your decisions should first and foremost be guided by your mission and other policy documents. “Mission Drift” occurs when organization leaders forget why the organization exists in the first place.
- **Operate in an open and transparent manner.** The decision making process of the organization should be clear and open to the public. Making decisions behind closed doors or without the input of key stakeholders is the quickest way to undermine community trust, even if you do it with the best of intentions. Policies, plans, and key documents of the organization should be readily available. Exceptions to this rule do exist: for example, when the board is discussing staff performance or legal issues.
- **Good financial practices.** The community donates resources, particularly financial resources, to the organization in the good faith assumption they will be used in the most effective manner to achieve the organization’s mission. Post key financial documents (such as financial policies and procedures, annual reports, audits, and 990s) online to make them available to the community.
- **Good management practices.** Make sure you are managing your other resources (such as volunteers, equipment, etc.) well. For example, know what your organization resources are (do you own computers, furniture, etc), and secure it from theft or misuse.
- **Be accountable.** Know how to track your organization’s performance, and be accountable to the community. At your annual meetings, in addition to electing board members, you should provide a

³ See Burns, J.M. (1978), *Leadership*, New York: Harper & Row.

report of your organization's financial condition and program activities. Don't cover up problems—the best way to approach problems is to confront them directly and in a fair and transparent manner. Board members should be the first ones to ask hard questions about the organization's performance, and be prepared to answer those questions in public.

- **Avoid conflicts of interest.** Board members and key staff have a duty to provide undivided loyalty to the organization. When that loyalty is compromised by other interests (whether personal or public), that conflict should be disclosed and recorded. Any individuals with a conflict of interest should remove themselves from debate and any votes on the issue at hand.
- **Don't take sides.** Neighborhood leaders should strive to be fair and equitable in decision-making, rather than taking sides on community issues. Never put your organization in a place where it is pitting neighbor against neighbor. Focus on identifying and working on consensus issues, but take time to mediate neighborhood tensions where appropriate.

6. Outreach 101: Pearl Diving

People are the most important asset your organization has. As a good organizer, you need to know who your members are, where they are, and what their interests are. Every organization should build and maintain a database (at the very least a card file) of members. Without that list, you can't reliably determine the extent of your most valuable asset.

One of the most basic components of developing participation is face-to-face relationships. Some people do this through a process known as "Intentional Relationships." Others do it through door-knocking. Whatever the process, the key is to identify what motivates people and build on common interests. Ultimately what you want to discover is the "self-interest" of each person you talk to.

Self-interest should not be confused with "selfishness." Self-interest is about the benefits and advantages one receives in common with others. By learning about the community through one-on-one exchanges, you can begin to identify patterns of self-interest that run through your community.

While the task of reaching out through one-on-one activities seems daunting, remember that time is on your side. Some neighborhood groups have been around for more than 100 years. When not directly working on an issue campaign, use the advantage of time to go out to meet with people and get to know them!

Some proven methods of outreach:

- **Door knocking:** The fundamental tool of organizers. Door-knocking is an excellent method for reaching out to homeowners, renters, and businesses. While on the one hand, you are reaching out to tell people about your organization, it's a two-way street. Be prepared to listen carefully to what people are telling you.
- **Block parties:** Invite residents to small impromptu gatherings right on their own block. Arrange to have a meeting in someone's home, in a driveway, or in a vacant lot. Some enterprising neighborhood associations acquire portable pop-up tents that they can easily install on a driveway, parking lot, or vacant lot. Provide food, or invite people to bring food to share. Encourage families to bring their kids, and provide opportunities for play. Keep the discussion casual, but use a flip chart to capture issues as

they come up. Make sure to get permission of the property owner first, door knock or drop flyers the week before, and door knock again an hour or so before the event.

- **Lemonade stands:** High rise buildings an obstacle? Arrange with the building management to host a “lemonade stand” near the elevator. Greet tenants as they are coming home from work or school, and share lemonade and cookies. All you need is a table, some chairs, and refreshments! Ask tenants for input on any broad issues such as safety, parking, etc, or specific input on a pressing neighborhood matter. Use a simple survey tool to gather information right on the spot.
- **Festivals and community celebrations:** Many neighborhoods in Minneapolis host community festivals and events as a way of promoting the neighborhood organization, establishing name recognition, and building relationships. Activities can include dunk tanks, kids activities, music, food, silent auctions, flea markets and more (be sure to check on local regulations first). Have a booth to distribute information, answer questions, gather input, and collect names and addresses.
- **Community meetings and hearings:** Along with door-knocking, one of the more common techniques for involving residents. However, community hearings can often result in unnecessary conflict by putting controversial issues to an up-or-down vote. When possible, rather than pitting neighbors against neighbors, ask open-ended questions and gather input on flip charts.
- **Open houses and charrettes:** A variation on a community meeting, open houses and charrettes give city staff and community leaders an opportunity to meet with community members one-on-one or in small groups in informal settings. An open house is simply an opportunity to provide information and gather input, while a charrette is a more involved design process, demonstrating different design options (massing of buildings, architectural styles, colors of buildings, etc), often using a combination of photos, maps, and even large maps with movable blocks representing buildings. Participants can examine and interact with the material, and provide input on their preferences. Open houses and charrettes can be far less threatening an environment, and can help participants understand the complexity and impact of development issues.
- **Surveys:** Surveys can be delivered in a number of ways-by mail, hand delivered while door-knocking, and even using online survey tools.
- **Newsletters:** Regular newsletters can be an excellent way to keep in touch with your community and keep people informed about what you are working on. You can also use them as an opportunity to solicit input (through brief surveys), raise funds, or recruit volunteers.
- **Web presence:** A number of web sites now provide free or inexpensive tools for neighborhood associations to establish a presence on the web. Use the opportunity to post meeting times, current news, minutes of board and committee meetings, annual reports, and other key organizational documents.

7. Turning your organization inside out

Is your organization really prepared for participation? Many volunteer boards want to enjoy the benefits of participation, but aren't as often concerned with the consequences that come with participation. Most importantly, make sure you provide a safe environment for participants.

According to International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), the core values for the practice of public participation are:

1. Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.
2. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
3. Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.
4. Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
5. Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.
6. Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
7. Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

If your community organization is serious about participation, this means leadership (particularly the board) must give up some level of control and power. Rather than thinking of itself as a decision making body, the neighborhood association board should think of itself as facilitating a process of community change.

True community power also invariably comes with a certain amount of conflict and tension. If we are truly bringing together all the diverse interests in our community, then we should expect that there will be conflicting values and competing ideas. The goal of community leadership is not to meet all of those needs or to reconcile all the differences. Rather, it is to facilitate a community discussion in order to identify common ground. Skilled community leaders do this by synthesizing ideas and reframing issues in ways that most or all community members can agree on (or at least live with). To do this, experienced community leaders set aside their personal agendas in favor of developing a community agenda.

Inexperienced boards often seek to control and constrain committees. Mature boards delegate responsibility and authority to committees, provide them guidance on how to carry out their work, and seek out volunteers, funds, and other resources to support them. Exceptional boards recognize that the real work of the organization occurs not in the board room, but out in the community.

8. Identify the assets that exist right in your own community

Every community has an abundance of resources available to at least start to address its own issues. Once you know your community's priorities, identifying your community's assets can be the best place to begin developing strategies for your neighborhood action plan.

- **What are the people resources in your community?** Take time to get to know what skills, knowledge, interests, ideas, relationships, and more, exist within your community. Often, the best way to identify these human resources is to go out and talk to people, one-on-one, face-to-face.
- **Who are the formal and informal leaders in the community?** Some individuals have formal leadership roles (such as city council members), while others have less visible but equally important leadership

roles (such as the owner of a neighborhood business or a respected community elder). Learn who these people are and what influence they have. Cultivate these relationships.

- **What other institutions might share an interest in achieving your community's goals?** Develop an inventory of schools, businesses, nonprofits, or government agencies work in or around your community, and find out what their interests might be. Take time to visit them, listen and learn about them, find out what their priorities and interests are, and then share what you are working on.
- **What are the physical assets in your community?** Take the time to map out your community and map out actual physical assets: parks; government buildings (such as schools, police stations, fire stations, etc.); major streets; commercial nodes; community gathering spots (such as coffee shops); green spaces; and more. Even vacant buildings can be seen as an asset (in the Twin Cities, vacant school buildings have been converted to such diverse uses as community centers, business incubators, or senior housing).
- **What are your historical assets?** Learn about the history of your community. What have been important milestones for the community? Who knows the history in your community? Are there significant historical structures, places, people, or events associated with your community?

9. Ensure adequate resources to carry out your work

Even the best-laid plans quickly become dusty pieces of paper without the resources and commitment of individuals and organizations to carry them out.

- **Develop a fundraising plan.** The board should take time to determine what resources the organization will need and should develop an appropriate plan to meet those needs. The fundraising work may be carried out by the board, by staff, or by an outside consultant. But the board should be closely involved in that work to help guide and monitor the fundraising efforts.
- **Know why people are engaged in your organization.** People join organizations such as neighborhood groups for many different reasons. Some join because they want to be actively engaged in improving the neighborhood. Just as many may join because they want to learn more about the community, or want to meet their neighbors. For some it may be a social activity, for others a learning opportunity. For all there is some self-interest in joining and becoming active, and they are all legitimate.
- **Identify ways to meet the needs of individuals serving on the board or committees.** Effective organizations provide training opportunities for board and staff. It is equally important to provide social engagement. Learning and social activities can help build stronger bonds within the board, and create greater opportunities for common understanding.
- **Identify partners to help carry out your work plan.** No organization exists in a vacuum. Organizations frequently will identify partners who have similar goals to work with temporarily to achieve their ends. The board should be aware of what it gets out of the partnership, what it brings to the table, and what expectations it has for working together. The board should also recognize that partnerships have a limited lifecycle—there are no permanent allies.
- **Identify volunteers to take on the work of the organization.** The board should know what its volunteer needs are, and should develop a plan for involving people in the organization. If increasing participation is a major goal for the organization, then the board should be actively engaged in developing and carrying out a long-term plan for increasing participation.

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10. Provide Opportunities for Learning, Celebration and Fun:

Create opportunities to reward and recognize volunteers, and to boast and brag about your great work. Remember, effective community work should be fun and rewarding!

- Invite **guest speakers** (police chief, head of planning, etc.)
- Provide **special reports and updates**: what is happening with the park, or what is the safety committee doing?
- Provide "**open mic nights**" which are open sessions for community members to raise issues.
- At **annual meetings** to elect the board, provide financial reports, have vendor tables or booths (housing programs, local police, inspections, fire department), entertainment and food.
- Host **holiday celebrations**: have a party with refreshments, music, magician, etc. Ask people to bring bags of food for a food shelf, or blankets and clothing for a shelter.
- Appoint "**greeters**" from the board who are responsible for greeting new attendees and making them feel welcome and comfortable, and who will encourage them to participate.
- Appoint "**facilitators**" from the board who are responsible for looking for people who may not have gotten a chance to speak, or who are talking too much, and making sure everybody gets a chance to speak.
- Let's have a **social night**: forget conducting business and just break bread together and bond.
- Provide **volunteer recognition opportunities**: appreciate one person each month, or several at a special occasion (whether or not they volunteer for your organization).
- Recognize **special contributors** to the neighborhood. "Here are Frank and Betty Smith who renovated the historic house at 123 Bountiful Street."
- Host a "Donor Appreciation Night."
- **Roast and toast** the outgoing Chair or Executive Director.
- **Boast and brag**: what has the organization done recently? Let's celebrate!
- Appoint "**fun monitors**" who are responsible for keeping the meeting upbeat and energetic.

11.Resources!

Resource and URL	Notes
Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative http://www.dsni.org/	Despite being one of the poorest neighborhoods of Boston, the Dudley Street neighborhood experienced an amazing renaissance starting with a resident based planning process.
Fieldstone Alliance http://www.fieldstonealliance.org	Fieldstone’s website has online articles covering issues such as managing conflict, community development, finances, collaboration, change, and more (click on “free resources”).
Internal Revenue Service http://www.irs.gov/charities/index.html	Yes, the IRS. The IRS has a lot of helpful resources on its webpage for Charities and Nonprofits. Click on “ABC’s for Tax-Exempt Organizations,” “Annual Electronic Filing Requirement for Small Exempt Organizations,” or “Political Activity” and other links for more helpful resources.
International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) http://www.iap2.org/	IAP2 is an international association of members who seek to promote and improve the practice of public participation in relation to individuals, governments, institutions, and other entities that affect the public interest in nations throughout the world.
Internet Nonprofit Center http://www.nonprofit-info.org	Check out the great “Frequently Asked Questions” page, with links to hundreds of resources on the internet to answer your nonprofit questions.
Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program http://www.nrp.org	Check out the new NRP web site, with new resources, including virtual project tours, training manuals, and other resources.
Nonprofit Law Podcast http://nplawcast.com/	“The nonprofit law podcast is a weekly show highlighting legal issues facing nonprofits. Hosted by Tim Mooney, an attorney with over a decade of experience in nonprofit law, this entertaining and informative program helps staff, officers and directors of nonprofits to understand the laws that impact their organizations.”

Some reading materials:

- Burns, J.M. (1978), Leadership, New York: Harper & Row.
- Chait, R.P., Ryan, W.P., and Taylor, B.E. (2005). Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards. BoardSource. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
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