A Community Action Process

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A Community Action Process

While successful community projects have been undertaken in many ways, a systematic approach is most likely to lead to success. A systematic approach aids in planning all phases of a project. A systematic approach can also help a group understand which phases of a project haven’t succeeded and, thus, what actions need to be taken to correct projects that are failing.

One of the first attempts to lay out a step-by-step process for community action was Beal’s “Social Action Process” (Beal, 1958). The community action process model presented in this publication borrows heavily from Beal’s “Social Action Process” but also incorporates ideas on leadership, dealing with opposition and working with a community’s power structure.

The community action process consists of nine steps to successful completion of a community project. The sequence provides a logical guide for group leaders and has proven successful in many communities. While the nine steps are laid out in sequential order, in reality, the order of the various steps may vary from project to project.
Figure 1. Community Action Process
PROBLEM /OPPORTUNITY SITUATION
Most community projects are initiated to deal with a particular community problem or opportunity. The problem/opportunity may involve only a few members of the community or it may affect nearly all of them. In either case, it will have a history, a prior situation that leads some community members to respond.

In examining the problem/opportunity, it is important to consider the experiences community residents have had with this situation, to understand who feels the problem or sees the opportunity and what events led to the decision to take action. A problem/opportunity may be either internal to the social setting—one that has built up through time and is now coming to a head, or it may be a problem/opportunity that has been triggered as a result of outside events, such as new state or federal regulations or economic changes that have taken place beyond the boundaries of the community.

Since the problem or opportunity is likely to have a history within the community, there may have been previous attempts to deal with it. The success or failure of such experiences will bear on the success of the current project. An understanding of the previous social situation can help in predicting probable responses to the current project. Understanding the prior social setting can also help avoid pitfalls that were encountered in previous projects. The core group of people who initiate the project should consider the history of the problem/opportunity carefully and review the following steps carefully before proceeding.

COMMITMENT TO ACTION
The project initiators consist of community members who actually feel the problem or recognize the opportunity. They get together, discuss the situation, decide that something ought to be done and that they are the ones who are going to do it. This convergence of concern about the problem is the spark that ignites the community project. Their commitment to action is important; without it, nothing happens.

The initiators also plan the original strategy for implementing the community project. They frequently realize that other community members will be needed and recruit their participation.

GOAL FORMULATION
The next step is goal formulation. Once the initiators have come together and decided that something needs to be done about the problem, they need to have a vision of what they would like to see happen. They need to establish goals and priorities. For the project to be successful, the goals need to be shared by the members and must be clear to the group. Setting goals helps the group determine which activities must be conducted to reach them. Goal formulation starts the group on its way to strategy planning. A group can establish goals in a number of ways. Several techniques are described in MontGuide 8401 HRD, “Setting Group Goals.”
STRATEGY PLANNING

Once the group has established its goals, it must decide how to go about reaching them. Again, a systematic approach to strategy planning is likely to be more successful than a haphazard approach. In strategy planning, the group needs to decide what actions have to be taken to reach each goal, and who is going to do the action. Next, the group needs to plan when each action should be accomplished and how it will know whether the action has been successfully achieved. One method for doing this is to write the strategy on flip chart paper in a column listing all the actions to be taken, followed by a second column listing who is going to take each action, a third column for recording the deadline for each action and a fourth column indicating how the group will know the action has been successful.

OPPOSITION

During the strategy planning phase, the group should also consider how it will deal with opposition. Many community action projects fail because they lack a systematic plan for dealing with opponents. Project leaders need to analyze who will benefit and who will lose from the project. Carefully thinking through who is likely to be opposed to the project and determining how to deal with that opposition will lead to a greater chance of success. Opposition is likely to emerge when:

1. The nature of change and its impact are unclear—fear of the unknown.
2. Resources are limited—if some get them, others won’t.
3. People feel criticized.
4. People expect the change to interfere with accomplishment of their goals.
5. Community loyalties, values or norms are ignored.
6. The change is perceived as serving someone’s personal interest.

Strategies based on keeping the opposition in the dark and not letting them know what is taking place are almost doomed to failure. Once the opposition learns of the project, if they can show they were not being dealt with fairly, decisionmakers are likely to reject the project. Probably the best strategy is to identify likely leaders of the opposition early, meet with them and involve them throughout the process, trying to get their support or at least neutralize their opposition. (See MontGuide 8515 HRD, “Conflict Management.”) If this can’t be accomplished, the group will need to try to build greater support within the community for its position than the opposition can build for theirs.

On almost any issue, there will be an immediate group of people who are in favor of the project and another immediate group against the project. Each of these groups will be surrounded by other residents or groups that, although not directly concerned, can be expected either to oppose or support the project. A successful strategy for community action likely requires a plan for contacting the groups expected to support one’s position and getting them to commit their support.
WORKING WITH THE POWER STRUCTURE

Studies of community power structures indicate there are usually a few people within a community whose support or lack of support can mean the success or failure of a project. These individuals are often termed the power structure. They have the capacity to mobilize resources to accomplish goals and the power to impose, or at least threaten, sanctions to encourage compliance. Many projects fail because the support of these “legitimizers” was not obtained early in the process.

There are both formal and informal power structures. The formal power structure consists of the elected officials and agency personnel of organized government. The informal power structure varies from community to community and from issue to issue. In some communities, one dominant family influences what does or doesn’t occur in the community. In other communities, close-knit cliques get together to discuss community projects. These power cliques, even in rural communities, tend to come from Main Street. Farmers are rarely included unless they control large resources and come from families with high social standing. There are also one-industry towns in which the owners or executives of the predominant industry constitute the power structure. Examples include lumber mill towns or mining towns.

As the composition of the power structure varies from place to place, it also varies from time to time. The old established power structure tends to crumble in communities that are experiencing population shifts due to changes in the local economy. In some communities, the power structure simply grows old and tired and new people step in and take their place.

As the community becomes more diverse and specialized, the power structure may also become more specialized or factional. These factionalized power structures may hold quite different values and goals. Examples would be communities with separate power structures for labor, religious groups, minorities, business and industry, special interests and different political parties. Factionalized power structures may choose sides on issues and form power coalitions.

There are several methods for identifying the influentials who make up the power structure for a particular issue. Probably the simplest is the reputational approach. Using this method, one simply asks a number of knowledgeable people, such as bankers, business professionals or government officials, who they consider to be influentials on the particular issue. The names they mention are recorded. Then the people named are asked the same question. The names mentioned most frequently are likely to constitute the power structure.

On major community issues, three levels of actors are likely to be present—the influentials, the lieutenants and the doers.

The influentials may initiate policy, undertake action and direct or supervise community projects. Perhaps more importantly, they have the power to veto suggestions or ideas brought forward by others. Their support “legitimizes” the project in the community. This is why their support is so critical to the success of community projects.

Influentials tend to be long-term residents. They tend to control considerable resources and power in the community. Often, they are more than 45 years of age. They may belong to many organizations but attend few of the organizational meetings. More often, their role is advising the current officers.
The next level of leadership in the community is the lieutenants. These are the people who actually carry out the details of planning and implementing programs. They tend to be highly visible, which leads the less knowledgeable to identify them as the influentials in the community. They may be beholden to one or several of the influentials for their positions. Lieutenants tend to occupy elected and appointed official positions. Others are middle-management level professionals or younger, upwardly mobile professionals. Lieutenants are important to the success of a group’s project because they provide the links to the influentials. Often, they are the ones who carry the group’s message to the influentials and bring back the response. So it is important to be able to identify the lieutenants who have the ear of the influentials one is trying to reach.

The third level of leadership is the doers. These are the people who actually carry out the policy decisions. They serve on working committees, collect funds and carry petitions. Doers are usually not natives of the community, often having lived in the community 10 years or less. They tend to be the active members of service groups, such as Lions, Jaycees or Kiwanis. In time, some may advance to become lieutenants.

In determining whom to contact for support of the group’s project, the group needs to consider whether this is a program of general community concern or special interest. Soundings should be taken to determine the amount of interest that the important influentials may have in the project and whether they are likely to be supportive of it. Support from the legitimizers may be obtained through private, informal contacts, through formal meetings with them or through their lieutenants. In a factionalized setting, this may require contacting a number of influentials. It is important to remember that most problems have a previous history and that the influentials probably have previous experience with the problem. Further, each has his or her own personality traits and may have a history of conflict with others involved in the project.

**AWARENESS DIFFUSION**

In this step, the group takes its message to the public to create a general awareness of the project and to build support for the project within the broader community. Again, a systematic approach is likely to be the most successful. Such an approach starts with determining who the various publics are within the general public and how they can best be reached.

In the first phase of the diffusion process, it helps to determine exactly what message needs delivering to whom and which elements of the project are likely to have the greatest appeal to whom.

Second, it must be determined who is going to deliver the group’s message to the various publics. The people who served as the initiators of the project may not be the best people to carry the message to the general public. At this point, people who have zeal for the project are needed, people who are good salesmen, who have the dedication to see the project through, and who firmly believe in the program themselves. It’s helpful if these people are already recognized by the public as action leaders within the community.
Next, the group needs to consider how and when the message is going to be delivered. It is helpful to actually lay out a weekly or monthly schedule of publicity activities that will go on throughout the life of the project. Successful awareness programs keep their message before the public all the time. Doing so requires using a variety of different publicity techniques. A sample diffusion plan might include a publicity splurge to launch the campaign, participation in radio talk shows, planning to appear once a month on television programs, press releases in the paper every second week, displays at community fairs, posters, and speakers going out to meet with community groups to explain the program. Different elements of the project can be presented at different times to keep the project “fresh.” If a systematic diffusion plan is developed at the beginning of the project, the chances for gaining public acceptance are much greater than if publicity is a one-shot affair.

Finally, the group needs to know whether or not it has been successful in carrying its message to the public. Some feel for success may be obtained through informal discussions with people. But again, a systematic approach involving a follow-up attitude survey is more likely to tell how successful the campaign has been.

IMPLEMENTATION

Once the group has a clear understanding of the problem or opportunity, and it has developed goals and strategies, identified legitimizers in the power structure, formulated a plan for gaining their support and outlined an awareness diffusion plan, it faces the task of implementing strategy.

Now the group actually carries out the plans with all of the various action steps in a logical, sequential order, checking each step to make sure it has been completed. If a step has been unsuccessful, the group must determine what can be done to rectify the situation.

EVALUATION

The final step in the community action process is often evaluation. The group determines how successful its efforts have been. While it can be the final step, the group should really be evaluating how well it is doing at each step in the process. If it hasn’t been successful in a particular stage, it should return to that step and redo it rather than pass over it. Careful evaluation helps the group understand what has been done well and what hasn’t been done well. Evaluation can help the group develop alternative methods where efforts have not succeeded.

LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Different phases of a project often call for different skills or different personal characteristics. Therefore, different people are needed to carry out the various tasks. At the beginning, initiators who have sufficient respect in the community to rally others to their cause are needed. Next, people with analytical, planning and organizational skills are needed to chart the project’s course.
These may or may not be the same people who initiated the project. Communication skills, both verbal and written, are called for to carry the group’s message to the public. (See MontGuide 8303 HRD, “Talk About Listening,” and Montana Cooperative Extension Service Circulars 1291-1292, “Effective Communication” and “Group Communication.”) Later, technical writing skills may be required to prepare grant proposals.

In addition to these “task” skills, all groups need leaders with “maintenance” skills to hold the group together (see MontGuide 8404 HRD, “Choosing Leadership Styles,” and MontGuide 8402 HRD, “The Individual and the Group”). Maintenance skills help ensure an open flow of communication and help keep the group’s morale high.

Maintenance skills also help the group cope with internal conflict. Group members are likely to hold a variety of expectations and individual agendas they hope will be satisfied by the project. Group leaders need to recognize the potential for conflict raised by the differing expectations in the group and be able to handle conflict successfully. Probably more community projects fail because of personality conflicts within the group than for any other reason. (See MontGuide 8515 HRD, “Conflict Management.”)

Group leaders need to understand that a variety of skills and several different types of people may be called on in different situations. They must be willing to delegate responsibility and authority to others at those times. Group leaders and members need to embrace the concept of shared leadership.

CREDIT

The last step in the community action process is credit distribution. A wise man once said that credit is divisible by infinity. Another said that credit is like fertilizer: It’s no good unless it is spread around. A wise group will be sure to give credit where credit is due, to everyone who was involved in a successful community action process. As with the other phases planned, a systematic recognition program is likely to be the most successful.
REFERENCES


