



# SEVEN TIPS FOR WORKING IN GROUPS

Most activist leaders learn about working in groups by doing it. You don't have the time or inclination to slog through long tomes about group behavior, so we've distilled seven of the most important tips we believe particularly apply to cooperative efforts — groups of groups — no matter the structure of your effort.

## 1. Relationships between people come first.

The combined group can accomplish the task at hand only after the individuals first create a feeling of trust, safety and awareness of who is in the room and why. People can't work in the interests of the collective group until they are clear that they will be heard and their needs and ideas addressed.

Understanding and relating to each other personally is an essential part of building safety before anyone can work well across different backgrounds and perspectives or race and culture. We've seen lots of cooperative efforts launch right into defining vision, goals and a plan of action before participants feel comfortable with each other, often resulting in conflict and disagreement.

 **Exercises 2.4a and 2.4b on pages 30 and 31 help relationships build quickly.**

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*"WE STRUGGLED, AT FIRST, ON BUILDING TRUST, CONSENSUS, AND GOVERNANCE. Eventually we realized trust and that's when the Coalition began building momentum and achieving success. No individual groups put their self-interest above the interests of the other groups."*

ADAM SNYDER, ALABAMA RIVERS ALLIANCE

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## 2. To go fast, it helps to go slow.

Take time to ensure that individuals understand each other and each organization. Slow down and listen deeply to each person speaking about their

work, values and perspective on the issues. How does each member see the issue, understand the problem? Develop a rich and complex picture of the opportunity and/or problem at hand so that the confluent differences within the group become a resource. Articulating differences is essential at this juncture, plus identifying where you will need to disagree. With a common understanding, the group can move to planning goals and action that has true group ownership and can be implemented flexibly.

 **Do Exercises 2.5 and 2.8 on pages 33 and 36 to get familiar with the other groups and build understanding.**

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*"THE MOST IMPORTANT QUALITIES OF LEADING START WITH SILENCE, then with listening and then with intention – in that order. I can feel myself falling into a different way of being – into a quieter place, quieting my mind and listening to them at their pace. If I can be in that place then it all just happens, I don't even have to work at it. The intention is to listen and understand their concerns, not think I know their questions and concerns or ideas. Lead with the intention to help them and to serve our common goals."*

Laura Ziemer, Western Water Project, Trout Unlimited

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## 3. Pay attention to the tension between what the full group may need and what individual participants want.

Wants and needs of the participating groups and individuals may differ. Honestly and clearly stating your organization's needs and wants and identifying where these do and don't coincide with what the cooperative effort needs is very helpful. This can be difficult since at times these are also areas of competition, so going slow and creating safety helps.



Organizations usually then recognize and agree on what they must give up — full credit, media presence, control over strategy, etc. — to create something greater.

 **Complete Exercises 2.2 and 2.3 on pages 28 and 29 for insight into balancing individual and full-group needs and wants.**

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*"OUR BIGGEST OBSTACLE WAS FEAR — THAT WE WOULD CREATE OUR OWN COMPETITION, or that some group would win or lose. We dealt with that by naming the fears — people disclosed. 'We're afraid that someone will take the money or resources or we won't get the credit.' Those are real fears. It's why you have to work in your self-interest. We ran straight into the face of the fears, and figured it out."*

DIANE JENSEN, MINNESOTA PROJECT

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#### **4. Power dynamics are always present.**

People and organizations will often vie for power and recognition, and the nonprofit world is no different. In coalition settings or multicultural cooperative efforts, unrecognized differences can undermine the group's cohesion. We recommend that the combined groups identify the different sources of power, knowledge and influence of each, and recog-

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*"I THINK WE DON'T DO AS GOOD A JOB OF LISTENING. Some of our leadership can be more forceful — they set a position and stick to it. When one does that, the emphasis is not on finding a course that works for everyone but on having everyone agree with your vision. The truth is that when people are more willing to trust, to give in, and to not be the authority on everything, we develop much better solutions as a coalition. Also, once people are willing to let others step up as leaders, then you're building capacity and leadership."*

ADAM SNYDER, ALABAMA RIVERS ALLIANCE

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nize the impact of social, racial and economic differences. An example is the power differences between local, state and national groups — each has resources that are vital to the joint effort, but often local groups feel overrun by the national groups' access to money, press and congressional staff. Or individual groups have different styles of leadership and must figure out how to work in a coalition. Good facilitators or diversity consultants can help a multicultural group develop inclusive ways to work across differences. Balancing power needs to be openly discussed, guidelines agreed to, and a cooperative agreement signed.

 **Exercise 2.10 on page 39 supplies a way to help a group name and claim its diverse sources of power, and Exercise 3.4 on page 62 provides a template for a cooperative agreement.**  **Read Chapter 4 for ways to balance the Give/Get ratio, dynamic tensions and power.**

#### **5. Develop a culture (together!).**

Be intentional about the culture you would like to create and model behaviors and establish norms that reinforce that culture from the start. For example, if you truly want a democratic, participatory process, make certain that everyone is given a time at the first meeting to express their views on several key issues. Take the time to create ground rules or operating principles that can be encouraged and monitored by all participants.

 **Exercises 2.6 and 2.7 on pages 34 and 35 offer processes to build a group culture.**

#### **6. All groups progress through predictable and unavoidable phases.**

Different individual behaviors become apparent in each phase of development, and specific work must be completed in order to move to the next phase. If the work in a specific phase is not completed, the group will either return to it at a later time or their work together may be interrupted by conflict or stunted by avoiding unresolved issues.

 **See Chart 1A Taming the Pack: A Field Guide to Group Development on page 13.**



## 7. Group reflection is necessary for learning and improvement.

Most of us love to do things. We are in the business of fixing things, working to make the world a better place. But there is power in taking time to reflect, to just be together. Celebrating can build solidarity and coherence, benefiting the overall strategy and camaraderie. Reflect on your group's efforts, discuss what worked well and what didn't, and why.

Then, with a deeper, shared understanding, your group can plan for future work equipped with tested experience and new insights.

☞ **Do Exercise 2.1 and 2.12 on pages 26 and 41 to evaluate how your cooperative effort is doing and discuss areas for improvement.**

⇒ **Also read Constant Motion, Constant Learning on page 84 in Chapter 4.**