

DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP

Building Citizen Participation

Description

CED ultimately depends upon a community base, but that means more than just the geographical locality. It means a base of active citizenry *taking some initiative* to improve conditions for living and working in the locality. So mobilizing citizen participation is a key tool for any successful CED program. The pattern of techniques for assuring wide participation builds the basic human resource for CED.

Note that citizen participation almost exclusively refers to volunteering the necessary effort, but even if some compensation is involved, even for minor participation (for example, a free movie ticket for agreeing to complete a long survey document), the same principles apply. (See also [Volunteering for Skills and Experience](#).)

Getting people involved in the CED process is not an easy or simple task. Just because citizens *ought* to be concerned (and perhaps in fact often are, but don't know quite what to do about it) does not mean that they will actually participate in the necessary tasks. Whatever is done to arouse participation must recognize the following basic principles:

- People ordinarily participate in an activity when asked one-on-one by the 'right' person. That is, merely advertising for interested folk to show up for a meeting does not do a good enough job.
- All of us have the common need to feel effective in whatever we undertake. Getting and keeping participation will depend upon the citizen having an opportunity to actually accomplish something. Merely being asked for an opinion on a survey or being asked to sit on an advisory board is not satisfying enough for a lot of people.
- People want to work on something that makes sense to them. The technical workings of the local economy are not everyone's cup of tea, so CED has to be put into everyday language that demonstrates how it impinges on day-to-day life.
- People will be attracted to work on something that they already have some kind of interest in. Thus the best prospective volunteers will have had some prior experience or even training in the project's field or in tasks related or required for it.
- Getting people to work together usually means they have to assemble at a place and time for that purpose. Such meetings should be set up in a way that is respectful of each

Tools & Techniques

person's time and energy. Barriers that may prevent participation, such as transportation and daycare, may also need to be addressed.

A useful pattern to consider is provided by Cowichan Community Futures Development Corporation in B.C., which is recognized for its high level of citizen participation over the past eight years or so. (It generally has over 100 volunteers working at any one time.)

The Cowichan technique has been to do thorough community surveys (by face-to face interviews, telephone interviews, kitchen table meetings, etc.) to identify issues and ideas; then produce and widely distribute an issues paper; and thereafter assemble public meetings for as much as two days to go into things in more detail. Once the meetings have laid out some framework for amplification and action, key roundtables for continued participation and action will be formed - for example, on youth; fisheries; agriculture; tourism; high tech. These tend to meet at least monthly and are routinely consulted for direction as to what the CFDC should do.

Key to maintaining the energy of these roundtable action groups is at least some staff support. But a group may eventually develop so much that it will establish its own organization, find financing, and hire its own support staff. The action groups may (and usually do) need some facilitation services to help them resolve problems, but the basic key is to genuinely derive the issues and action plans from the people in the community who are actually involved and affected by the issues concerned. Thus those who have a stake in the activities also truly have influence on what is to be done.

Benefits

CED is an extremely ambitious strategy, and it requires prodigious amounts of effort. Unless that effort is shared widely, the people involved will soon wear out. Broad citizen participation means more energy is available to accomplish the CED goals. Moreover, the wider the citizen participation the more enthusiasm, skill and knowledge is generated and shared, so more can get done and community capacity is strengthened in the process. Thus wide citizen participation is not just a matter of democratic ethics, it is a practical requirement for a long-term undertaking like CED.

Major challenges

To get people involved in specific meaningful tasks requires that the sponsoring organization is itself well focussed and knows what it is trying to do. The early-stage CEDO (or its initial organizing nucleus of people) must go beyond mere general ideas of local improvement. And yet there is a danger in being too specific, before a wide range of the citizenry have had

a chance to voice their own thoughts on what is to be done. How to achieve that balance of specificity and openness to other ideas will tax the ingenuity of the initial core of organizers.

Some practical steps

1. Since each person recruits from her/his own network of friends, associates, and relatives, the most important first step is rounding up the kind of people who have a wide and strong network to mobilize and, in addition, are articulate, persuasive 'salespeople.' A collection of such key people (from different community sectors) will assure the best chance for wide citizen participation for the specific task at hand.
2. Each such key person will know best who to approach in his/her own network and must do so on a one-to-one basis.
3. There will be many different and varied tasks to be addressed. It is necessary to sort them out and recruit appropriately for each of them.
4. Set up each meeting on a particular task with a clear, specific, and doable agenda for the limited time allocated, and schedule them to fit the participants' own schedules.
5. As necessary, establish orientation or training programs for volunteers, so that they understand fully the tasks and goals at hand and have the skills to complete them.
6. Plan for volunteer recognition activities where contributions are acknowledged and are given the publicity that encourages others to participate.

Resource organizations & contacts

There are all sorts of possible resources, because every kind of group has confronted the same job of engendering participation and recruiting volunteers, and over time they have developed highly sophisticated techniques that can be used by others. Thus, for example, United Way furnishes its local groups with entire curricula and workshop structures for training and leadership development. Among the general volunteerism groups, see:

- Charity Village (www.charityvillage.com) is designed to encourage, support and serve Canadian charities and non-profit organizations. This site has sections for managers, staffers, fundraisers, volunteers, donors and supporters. There are also a career centre, bookstore and collection of how-to articles.
- Volunteer Canada, 430 Gilmour Street, Ottawa, Ont. K2P 0R8, (tel. 800-670-0401; website: www.volunteer.ca), the national resource centre for volunteerism, facilitates the work of volunteers, volunteer centres and voluntary organizations to develop resources and skills.
- Volunteer Vancouver, 3102 Main Street, Vancouver, BC V5T 3G7 (Tel: 604-875-9144; website: vancouver.volunteer.ca) provides training and consultation, research and program development, and an extensive library and resource centre.

Publications

- ***Case Study:** “Searching for Responses to Poverty.” The application of the “search conference” technique in the ambitious Opportunities 2000 to bring greater unity of purpose to a vast range of project partners.
- *Volunteers Working Together*, Skills Program for Management Volunteers, (Write: National Skills Program, 1600 James Naismith Drive, Gloucester, ON K1B 5N4). Although this was prepared for volunteers in recreation, fitness, and sports, it is readily adaptable to other concerns.
- Community Futures Development Association of B.C. and the Centre for Community Enterprise, *Entrepreneurial Communities: A Handbook for Social Action*. Find it in the “planning aisle” of the CED Bookshop at www.cedworks.com or phone (toll-free) 888-255-6779).
- Wayne Roberts and Susan Brandon, *Get a Life!* (available through the authors at #127-2255B Queen Street East, Toronto, ON).