

Action

FOR CHANGE

A GUIDE TO

Activism

WITH PUBLIC INTEREST
RESEARCH GROUPS



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The PIRG Network

There are now 21 Public Interest Research Groups across Canada: 3 in British Columbia, 2 in Alberta, 11 in Ontario, 1 in Newfoundland, 1 in Nova Scotia, and 3 in Quebec — and students continue to organize new chapters. All are located on university campuses and are funded and directed by students <www.pirg.ca>.

There are also over 200 PIRGs in the United States <www.pirg.org>.

The first PIRG in Canada was established in 1973 at the University of Waterloo in Ontario. Gradually, more PIRGs were formed, an Ontario network was developed, and an Ontario charitable provincial office was established. The Ontario network provides training and support to its members, and fosters cooperation between them — for issues and campaigns as well as more mundane tasks such as writing policies and procedures.

Often you will find that there are people at another PIRG working on an issue similar to yours. Taking the time to compare strategies and initiatives can often lead to very successful collaborative work. Each year, the Eastern and Western Ontario Public Interest Schools (PIS) bring together working groups from across the province. PIS participants share their experiences and ideas, and hold workshops on such topics such as team building, video production, and running a campaign. In addition to the PIS, the OPIRG Board Training School (BTS) provides training for volunteers who are — or wish to become — board members.

Action for Change: A Guide to Activism with PIRGs
Seventh Printing 2007 (first published in 1994)
Printed on 100% post-consumer recycled paper

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Waterloo Public Interest Research Group
Action for Change. Edited by Daryl Novak.
ISBN 0-9690545-9-9

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Purpose of this Guide

You are interested in the PIRG because you have a concern about some particular issue related to the well-being of people and other life on the planet.

Although there are many ways you can volunteer with the PIRG as an individual (i.e. research for credit, working in the office, etc.), most people choose to work collectively on issues with others – what PIRGs call Action Groups or Working Groups.

This guide will provide you with basic information on how to address your issue through working with the PIRG in an action/working group.

Although you will find reading the entire guide useful, if you are planning to take an active role in the PIRG, a must read is the section on Rights and Responsibilities.

Don't Reinvent The Wheel

The people who worked on this guide want your initiatives to be successful. Nothing has been included in this guide arbitrarily. In using the guide, your action/working group may overcome or avoid common problems that plagued other action/working groups and reduced their effectiveness.

Help Build A More Effective PIRG

Building a positive social change movement means more than working on one issue – it means working in solidarity with other people. Remember to always connect the PIRG's name to your action/working group's activities and projects. In this way, you support the work of other action/working groups – for instance, a new action/working group will benefit from the name recognition of the PIRG because other action/working groups helped to raise the profile of the organization.

Building a positive social change movement also means offering other activists what you have learned. How many times have you thought, "If only I had known that in the first place..."? Reflect on what works and what doesn't for your action/working group and pass that on to a staff or board person – or on to WPIRG for inclusion in the next edition of this Guide.

Action/Working Groups

Action/working groups are essentially collectives – groups of people who voluntarily agree to work together on a common issue towards a common goal while sharing responsibilities and decisions equally. PIRGs use the "action/working group" model in order to achieve...

Why PIRGs use the Action/ Working Group Structure

More impact – The power of a lot of people working together is enough to make changes where one person can do very little.

More ideas, energy, and hope – It's easier to keep working on issues against seemingly insurmountable odds when you're doing it with others who want things to change too.

More issues – Rather than the Board of Directors or Staff deciding what issues and projects should be undertaken, participants choose. Everyone becomes involved in social change because a particular issue has touched their life – PIRGs aren't here to pick your issue, just help you (and others) work on it. However, while you won't be told what issue to work on, PIRGs have finite resources and can't address every issue that participants bring forward.

More difficulty – Wait a second, this is actually a reason? Well, it may be the most important reason. Our culture values self-preservation and competition, so naturally, hierarchy and domination prevail. Today power is concentrated in the hands of well-organized individuals and corporations who have extraordinary power to make decisions that affect all of our lives. The best way to begin to undermine that power and privilege (and encourage democratic and just communities) is for each of us to learn how to work on creating a culture based on equality and cooperation – beginning with our own action/working group.

What Action/ Working Groups Can Achieve

One of the most common mistakes an action/working group makes is not thinking big enough. Working through a PIRG puts considerable resources at your disposal. You have experienced, well connected staff people to work with, a university campus full of faculty, students and facilities, and the credibility earned by an organization that has been at the forefront of environmental and social justice work in Ontario for over 20 years. The resources are there, you just have to use them.

Working For Change

During your career as an activist you will likely feel, occasionally at least, periods of hopelessness. You may feel helpless in a system where: those with power seem so distant and unshakable, most people appear apathetic, and the media ignores all of your hard work.

At times like these it is important to remember that you are not working alone and that there is a long and inspiring history to all efforts for social change.

In Canada, the rights and privileges presently accorded to individuals and groups are all the result of long and often bitter struggles!

Access to affordable post-secondary education, unemployment insurance, welfare, health insurance, minimum wage, affirmative action, abortion, equal pay, subsidized daycare, environmental protection... were not given to Canadians by a generous government concerned about the well-being of the majority, but as concessions to campaigns for justice being waged by people like yourself. Granted these measures are not complete or adequate, but remember people make it happen!

Similarly, issues like women's liberation, anti-racism, accessibility, lesbian-gay-bisexual liberation, environmental protection became public issues and mass movements from the efforts of committed individuals. Even a cursory glance at the day's papers will reveal articles dealing with issues and concerns being discussed that arose out of the struggles of activists around the world.

Obviously it is not possible to summarize a couple thousand years of history in several paragraphs. But the history of social movements is as exciting and inspiring as any romantic novel. You, as a member of PIRG, while typing up minutes, putting up posters, and organizing events are continuing in the long history of social change.

Sometimes it may not seem so romantic or dramatic, but keep in mind the efforts of your peers, your predecessors and those that will follow.

Students, around the world, have always played a central role in social movements. Students have made invaluable contributions to a diverse range of struggles for justice. For example students are central actors in the campaigns to: free Burma from a brutal dictatorship, end

apartheid in South Africa, end government involvement in the arms trade in Europe, and prevent the logging of Clayoquot Sound.

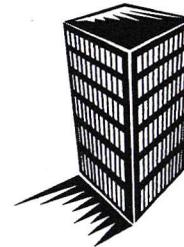
A sizable proportion of activists in unions, non-governmental organizations, community groups, and others learned their skills and analysis as students in a campus organization.

PIRGs provide an excellent setting to learn how to make a difference. They are neither an exclusively campus or community organization, but provide a way to bridge the two spheres.

Activism is a skill that needs to be learned like any other. In a truly participatory democratic society an educated and skilled citizenry is essential to its continuance.



PIRG Structure



Fee-Paying Members

Student fees are the primary funding source for PIRGs. In addition to tuition, students (undergraduates and/or graduates and/or part-time) pay a levy to the university which is then paid out to PIRG. The fee and a period of time when you can choose to have it refunded varies from PIRG to PIRG. Other people may purchase memberships through the PIRG office. Fundraising and successful grant applications provide additional sources of funds.

Volunteers

Volunteers are people who choose to take an active role in the organization by working with others in an 'action/working group' or by working in the office or on a special project.

Board of Directors

After volunteering with PIRG in other capacities, some participants choose to run for a position on the Board. Unlike action/working groups, the Board of Directors doesn't work on specific issues. While other volunteers put all of their energy into addressing issues,



Directors make sure the PIRG isn't forgotten in the process by focusing on the long-term viability of the organization – ensuring an office and resource centre is maintained, staff are hired and supervised, adequate activist training for volunteers is provided, the PIRG's profile and credibility is maintained, and the finances of the PIRG are handled in a responsible fashion.

Directors agonize over how the finite resources of the organization should be allocated to best serve the needs of all volunteers. The Board sets a yearly budget, in anticipation of expenses related to maintaining the office and resource centre, training for volunteers, and issue-related projects.

While incidental costs of issue-related projects are generally covered, you or your action/working group might want to approach the Board about money available for bigger initiatives (or where funding might be available).

Core staff

Core staff provide continuity in this ever-changing organization. They carry out critical basic tasks that maintain the integrity of the organization (like bookkeeping and training), assist participants in their activism, and provide connections to other activists and their organizations. OPIRG core staff are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 1281.

Grant staff

Grant staff are hired on contract by the PIRG to work on specific projects – the majority of grant staff hired are students.

The OPIRG Provincial Board of Directors

The OPIRG Provincial Board is comprised of two members from each local PIRG (one local Board member and one permanent staff person). This Board deals with matters such as networking meetings, provincial training schools, responding to enquires from students interested in establishing a PIRG at their school, and other decisions that require a collective response from the PIRGs.

Rights & Responsibilities

Everyone has expectations – you have come to the PIRG because you expect the PIRG to help you address some issue. Conversely, PIRGs have expectations of volunteers and they are outlined in the following rights and responsibilities:



Equal Treatment

All PIRG volunteers have the right to equal treatment regardless of race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, gender, sexual orientation, age, record of offences, marital status, family status, or handicap and have the responsibility to uphold these same rights of other people.

Although this right to equal treatment seems obvious, from a practical point of view, working together cooperatively is not easy.

People have different amounts of 'power' in our society based on attributes that have gained dominance in our culture, such as wealth, class, race, gender, or sexual orientation. In fact, all of the environmental and social injustices that exist today stem from inequality of power – injustices that you will struggle to address through your work with PIRG.

However, power inequalities exist in PIRG, just as they do in the rest of society and the task set before each of us is to build critical self-knowledge – to become aware of, and reflect on, the power society has arbitrarily bestowed on each of us.

If we reject building this critical self-knowledge we inevitably dominate over others, intentionally or not, ironically silencing people we are supposed to be working *with* to redress injustices.





Volunteers

All volunteers have the RESPONSIBILITY to:

- Recognize and promote diversity within PIRG and the larger community.
- Treat others with respect and consideration.
- Participate in PIRG sponsored training programs.
- Maintain the credibility of the organization, at least to the extent of ensuring that all factual claims made in public, in advance of being made public, are supported by research which could withstand reasonable scrutiny.
- Use reasonable judgement in making decisions and act prudently; that is, WITHIN THE LAW and in a fashion that does not jeopardize the organization.
- Follow through on commitments and notify the appropriate person when your obligations cannot be met.
- Check with staff before using the PIRG's name in any correspondence or public action.
- Remit to the PIRG any fees or honorariums you receive while representing your action/working group and/or the PIRG.



Action/ Working Groups

Action/Working Groups have the responsibility to:

- Seek approval to operate as an action/working group.
- Use consensus decision-making.
- Keep staff and board informed of decisions involving actions. This helps the PIRG direct interested volunteers to your action/working group. Furthermore, it provides a mechanism to ensure that action/working group goals and the manner in which they are achieved are consistent with the mandate of the PIRG.
- Record all actions, along with any information collected, and these records (or copies) should be left at the PIRG.
- Should promote the PIRG whenever possible.



What You Can Expect from the PIRG

- To be treated as a co-worker (and not just free help) with respect and consideration.
- To have the opportunity to experiment and to receive feedback in a supportive way.
- To be recognized for your knowledge, experience, and effort and receive a letter of reference if necessary.
- To be appreciated and thanked personally.
- To have money raised through you or your action/working group's fundraising efforts dedicated to your project or action/working group.
- Finally, if you need assistance, ask for it – staff and board members are here to assist you.



ORGANIZING YOUR ACTION/WORKING GROUP

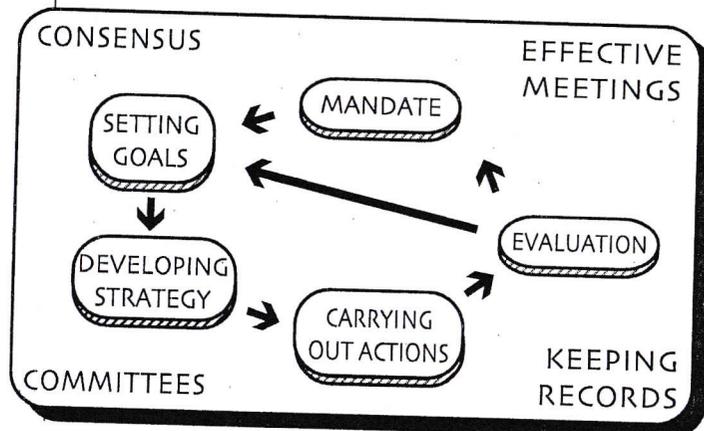
Action/Working Group Structure

There are two kinds of groups: where only one person or a few people in the group decide what the mandate should be and what actions should be taken while the remaining group members carry out tasks; and where the needs, opinions, and ideas of each person is as important as the issue and the group collectively labours to find common ground and share responsibilities equally.

PIRGs are only interested in fostering and supporting the latter – but in order for a group to operate in that way, there needs to be some kind of structure. Otherwise, when people are passionate about an issue and full of ideas, meeting after meeting can just end up being an intellectual exploration of the issue or a confusing barrage of ideas for action.

Sometimes even if a group manages to get it together and carry out actions, if they never discussed what they hoped to accomplish or why they were carrying out the actions, group members may end up very disillusioned about the results. People then become frustrated and give up on the action/working group, not because they don't care about the issue, but because they felt like very little was being accomplished.

Below is a diagram illustrating the basic structure action/working groups should use, followed by a description of each critical component:



Consensus Decision-Making

Consensus is a group decision-making process where all members are heard and the group works toward reaching a decision that is acceptable to everyone. The consensus process attempts to constructively deal with the range of opinion which naturally exists within any group.

Consensus will only work when participants make a serious commitment to using consensus, are respectful and supportive of each other, and are like-minded (serious division of opinion on fundamental issues destroys the essential cohesiveness of a group).

Consensus is not unanimity. Reservations or differences on a particular issue may still exist within the group – individuals may prefer a solution other than the one that is adopted. Consensus is reached if everyone in the group is willing to accept a decision and they feel it is the best possible decision which can be achieved under the circumstances.



Advantages of Using Consensus

Making decisions through consensus will often take more time and patience than simply voting. So why use consensus?

- It provides an equal opportunity for everyone to contribute information and have their opinions recognized.
- It decides without voting, so there is no “losing” and “winning” side.
- It results in a stronger decision because everyone can willingly give assent to an idea and therefore participate more fully in its implementation.
- People get a chance to hash things over and as a result often develop better proposals. A quick vote leaves a lot of creative ideas in the dust.
- It discourages backroom politics and encourages openness.
- It attempts to break down traditional power structures that generally ignore people from marginalized groups.

Group Conditions that Support Consensus



To use consensus effectively, group members must agree that the BEST decisions will reflect the thinking and agreement of all members.

1. Unity of purpose

There should be a basic core of agreement within the group. Of course there will be many areas where group members have varying opinions about what is best – but there must be a unifying base that is recognized and accepted as a common starting place by all members.

2. Equal access to power for all members

There should be no formal hierarchy which gives any member more authority than other members. Additionally, there should be an effort to share informal distribution of power. There is no “director” or “president” and all members contribute and participate equally, despite differences in seniority, assertiveness, and other personal qualities.

3. Time

The process of developing an effective consensus group requires time spent on group process and relations between members as well as time spent making decisions. Consensus groups can often work very smoothly and efficiently to make effective, stable decisions, but a difficult consensus decision cannot be rushed. If your group does not have the time to devote, or the patience to use the time, consensus will be thwarted.

4. A willingness to attend to process

The way group members work together to reach decisions is important and needs attention. Members of a consensus group must be willing and able to spend group time discussing process and working towards necessary changes in the process, as well as attending to tasks and decisions.

5. A willingness to attend to attitudes

Consensus works well when group members are willing to work cooperatively and when they feel they are able to trust each other. This requires a commitment by individual members to examine their own attitudes and to be open to change. Such trust and cooperation also requires a caring group community which supports the development of these attitudes.

6. A willingness to learn and practice skills

Skills for meeting participation, facilitation, and communication. The group must encourage and assist all of its members to develop these skills for the group to work well as a whole.



Using Consensus Process During Meetings

At the beginning of the meeting, confirm that everyone understands and agrees to use consensus decision-making. For each agenda item, there should be a clear statement outlining what needs to be decided (see the next section on effective meetings for more tips).

- If adequate discussion develops without significant controversy to a point where an acceptable opinion is identified, the facilitator can announce what the apparent decision is and test for consensus (i.e. “We seem to agree that . . . Is everyone satisfied? . . . Have we missed anything?”) and then move on to the next item.
- If the issue is contentious, only a minority has expressed their views, or the issue is of central importance to the group and requires a major decision, you may want to do a “go-around” and/or “brainstorm”. A “go-around” gives all members an opportunity to express their opinion (without criticism from others), thereby identifying any outstanding concerns or possible solutions. A “brainstorm” involves allocating time during which the group generates ideas freely – without editing, discussing or rejecting anything. Both methods can result in a more representative and creative list of concerns, positive aspects (list these in front of the group), and alternative solutions to a problem.
- In order to foster meaningful discussion, you can break up a large group into smaller ones (of three to six people) which then report back to the larger group with the results of their discussions. Generally, people are more comfortable fleshing out ideas in smaller groups – in larger groups, people tend to hang back and a long speakers list can preclude meaningful input.
- The decision made must be clear to everyone. Have the minute taker read out the decision.
- At a subsequent meeting, evaluate the success of the decision.



If Consensus Cannot Be Reached

Occasionally, one, two or more members of the group may have sufficient concerns about a decision that they withhold their consent. They should not be pressured to give-in and their concerns should be heard and respected – group members have a right to disagree.

You might want to try:

- Resuming discussion to find a creative solution everyone can endorse.
- Postponing the discussion and tackling it again when everyone has cooled off.
- Getting more information to make reaching a decision easier.

Or Try:

- Asking those who disagree if they would be willing to “stand-aside”. People will sometimes let a decision go forward even without their agreement, providing the decision doesn’t fundamentally undermine the group; the group has acknowledged and recorded their dissenting ideas; they won’t be asked to take on tasks related to the decision; or, that the decision does not set a precedent and the decision can be reviewed at a later date (perhaps at the end of a trial period).

Or, finally:

- If none of these strategies work, bring in someone who is not in the group to facilitate (perhaps a staff person or board member).
- If the issue is so divisive as to be unresolvable, the group can either drop the matter to preserve the group or those who disagree can leave the group.

Also refer to the appendix **Consensus: Possible Solutions to Some Common Problems.**



Effective Meetings

Make your meetings a regular thing – in the same place, at the same time, and as often as your action/working group feels it’s necessary – it will be easier for people to remember if it doesn’t change all the time and for staff to direct new volunteers to your action/working group.

When choosing a meeting place consider if the location is wheelchair accessible and whether it is safe for women (i.e. not in a deserted building or poorly lit area).



Ingredients for Effective Meetings

- The meeting is necessary and the purpose is clear.
 - The meeting is held in a comfortable setting.
 - An agenda is prepared (and circulated before hand if possible).
 - Meeting starts and ends on time.
 - Meeting norms are clear. *
 - Following the meeting people feel satisfied with the outcomes or productivity level of the meeting.
 - Members feel that their input was encouraged and feel good about being a member of the group.
- * PIRG action/working groups share responsibilities among members and use consensus decision-making. Within that general equality, particular roles and responsibilities are accepted by individuals (i.e. facilitator, minute taker, time keeper). It is important that these roles are rotated among members to promote full involvement of the membership and avoid disparities in knowledge and skills.



Using an Agenda



Agendas help to focus the action/working group when it meets – that way people don't get frustrated with a meeting because they don't know where it's going or how long it will be. Here is a typical agenda format:

- Record the date, place, and who is attending.
- Go around: have everyone in the group say how they're doing, give announcements, mention if they have to leave early, etc.
- Review last meeting's minutes.
- Review this meeting's agenda making any additions/changes.
- List all of the agenda items with who the presenter is and how much time you want to spend on it (don't underestimate – this will lead to frustration and people leaving early).
- Review priorities: review tasks undertaken and who is responsible.
- Evaluate the meeting: was everyone comfortable about the process.
- Set date/time for next meeting and identify who will facilitate.



Facilitator's Role

- Only directs the *process*, not the *content*, and never makes decisions *for* the group;
- Makes sure there is an agenda for the meeting by reviewing the previous meetings minutes;
- Introduces agenda items and defines the decisions that need to be made;
- Keeps discussion focused and moving;
- If the discussion becomes repetitive, the facilitator should sum up and move the discussion forward;
- Makes sure everyone is encouraged to speak and all input is heard;

- Indicates whose turn it is to speak and keep a speakers list if too many people want to talk and never allows a discussion to develop and continue between two people;
- Verbally checks for agreement (consensus) when the group is making a decision;
- Repeats back to the group points made, decisions made, tasks identified, and who is responsible for tasks;
- Monitors tone of the meeting (mood-minding – do people need a break?);
- Monitors discussion so no one individual or point of view dominates;
- Acknowledges and addresses conflict and discomfort (it doesn't go away if you ignore it);
- Asks someone else to facilitate if in a conflict of interest or is too involved in the item up for discussion;
- Makes sure new people are acknowledged and introduced.

Facilitation should change from meeting to meeting. Generally, the person who records the minutes should facilitate the next meeting (that way, they can refer back to the previous meeting when preparing the agenda). By rotating the role of facilitation, everyone develops the skill and the action/working group doesn't end up relying on (or overburdening) one person.

For large groups, contentious items/meetings, or when someone is new to facilitating, it's a good idea to have two people facilitating (one person keeps track of and sums up discussion, while the other person keeps a speakers list).

Finally, it is the responsibility of everyone at the meeting to "facilitate themselves" and/or step in and help if someone requires facilitation assistance.



Time Keeper's Role

- keeps the group aware of how much time is left for each item (i.e. flashes time left) and if time is running out the group should be informed and an open decision should be made to stop discussion or continue (avoids frustration or boredom!).



Minute Taker's Role

Keeping minutes of your meetings is crucial. Minutes help you to maintain continuity between meetings and assists your action/working group in evaluating its effectiveness. Minutes should be **concise** and as **brief** as possible and it is essential to include:

- A list of items discussed;
- Decisions reached;
- Actions and who has committed to undertake them;
- Discussions are only summed up if there were dissenting points of view;
- Keep a list of items that come up that should be on the agenda for the next meeting.

Action/working group minutes should be kept in the office, along with any other material (i.e. newspaper clippings) collected.



Keeping Records

Documentation allows anyone in the organization to come up to speed with what your action/working group has been doing. Some of the benefits:

- Helps someone decide if they want to join your action/working group.
- Easier to prepare newspaper articles, news releases, etc.
- Action/working group members can find out what happened at the last meeting if they missed it.
- Months or years after your action/working group has disbanded, your records could assist others in their work on the issue.

Action/Working Group Committees

The irony of a few members complaining about how much they have to do while others are left wondering what to do is just too common to be funny. Try establishing committees of two or more people to share burdens (and responsibilities). Some of the possible committees you might consider (brainstorm on others):

- The Information Committee would keep the action/working group informed of recent developments on the issue through monitoring the media, liaising with other groups, etc.
- The Media Committee would write up news releases, letters to the editor, or articles for submission to the student newspaper.
- The New Members Committee would ensure that new people would be introduced to other members, receive orientation to the issue and the PIRG, what the action/working group has done, and what is being planned. The new member could then choose their own committee to work in. All too often, a new participant finds their first meeting a totally alienating experience – things as simple as personal introductions are often neglected – needless to say, many new participants never return.
- The Display Committee would create an information display that could be used by the action/working group during any public event.

Action/working group members can be on more than one committee and can switch committees periodically. The advantages:

- A single person isn't burdened with a responsibility and new members won't feel all alone with a task.
- Less concentration of knowledge and skills. Sometimes one person can become the "expert" in their group with a particular role or task and when they leave, the group needs to scramble to fill the void.
- New members will be better integrated into the group. They will have an opportunity to work with people who have been in the action/working group for a while and will quickly become comfortable in taking on other responsibilities.
- Committees from various action/working groups could meet to discuss difficulties and successes.

Defining Your Mission Statement



Your action/working group needs to write down a mission statement – a short expression of issue and purpose. The first step in this process requires that the group spend time exploring why each person is considering working on the issue. The action/working group may spend time discussing these questions:

- Why are you interested in the group?
- What do you hope to accomplish over four or eight months by getting together with others on this issue?
- What kind of a time commitment can you make over the next four or eight months?

The next set of questions should be considered as a group. It will help to further focus the group's directions and activities and serve to clarify different members' agendas so as not to generate confusion and conflict as the planning of events and the setting priorities proceeds.

- Why is the group together?
- What does the group hope to achieve?
- Who does the group hope to reach?

In working out a clearly articulated mandate, it may prevent a action/working group from arbitrarily throwing all of its energy into an action that, in the end, members regret having spent all their time on. Two action/working groups focusing on the issue of anti-racism could have very different mission statements and thus, the actions that they plan will likely reflect their different interests:

1. To expose racism on campus and to educate and research around the issue of racism.
2. To provide a support network for people of colour to discuss anti-racist issues.

Another way to help develop a mandate and goals is the exercise, 'Why Are We Here?' (see appendix).

Setting Goals and Developing Strategy



After establishing a mandate, an action/working group will want to assess just how much is collectively known about the issue. Another set of questions that should be answered is:

- What do I know about this issue?
- What do I want to learn about this issue?

To ensure that everyone within your action/working group has an equal amount of information on the issue, your group may want to incorporate a "seminar/discussion" session into your meetings (where one person prepares reading material or gives a brief) or establish an information committee to keep everyone up to date (perhaps by preparing a brochure, or a binder of information).

Consider some of the following aspects in planning actions:

- Brainstorm on actions** that could be undertaken and consider if the action/working group has enough people and time.
The anti-racism group might choose to brainstorm around possible research projects, educational events, or projects that expose the issue on campus – perhaps a statistically valid survey of racism experienced by people of colour on campus.
- Desired results:** what does the action/working group hope to achieve from the action (should be specific, measurable, and make a difference).
The anti-racism group may try to get media coverage of the results of the survey; an article in the student newspaper; an interview on the campus radio station; develop a poster campaign that publicizes the statistics collected, initiate policy change that will allow for follow-up on acts of racism.
- Decision maker:** identify one or two people who hold power and could meet your demands.
The anti-racism group may try to find out what administrator would be in charge of policy changes.
- Tactics:** what do you do to get the decision maker to meet your demands – should be within your resources.
The anti-racism group might approach the administrator with the statistics collected and possibly a petition drive demanding policy change would be an extra incentive.

- Outreach:** how are you going to get popular support and get people involved?
The anti-racism group might consider a poster campaign be designed to elicit popular support.
- Allies:** who are they and how can you work with them.
For example, could the anti-racism group find professors and student clubs who would support the distribution of the survey and sign the petition.
- Opponents:** who are they, how will you deal with them, and can they be swayed?
- Timeline:** design short-term, intermediate, and long-term goals and attach dates.



Ongoing Evaluation



It's important to evaluate how your action/working group is doing. It's as important to recognize what is going well as what is not going well. The process of trying to achieve your goals can be rewarding even if you don't achieve them.

There are some simple on-going techniques that can work as ways to avoid problems at an early stage: doing evaluations at the end of your meetings; and appreciation events that celebrate successes. Plan time to do an evaluation of an event or campaign. Some evaluatory questions:

- Is the group achieving its goals?
- How are the group dynamics (is there friction, are some people dominating, are some not being heard, etc.)?
- Are group meetings productive?
- Is enthusiasm high or waning?
- Do you feel you are learning and gaining any valuable experience in your work?
- Is the group getting enough support from the PIRG?

Remember – Learn from your mistakes and your triumphs!

THE ACTIVISTS' TOOL BOX

Building Coalitions

Building a coalition requires that individuals and groups representing diverse interests be willing to focus on united goals, despite factors that may divide them, in a spirit of mutual understanding, patience, flexibility and group sensitivity.



Why A Coalition?

- > Strength in numbers
- > Take on larger issues
- > Build credibility with other organizations
- > Develop alliances that might be useful later
- > Create a response to an issue that has broad appeal



Single Issue or Multi-Issue Coalition?

Building coalitions means bringing together groups that do not always share similar agenda or agree explicitly on everything. Will the coalition organize around a specific issue or organize based on a larger commitment to social change? Single issue coalitions can be more effective in attracting interests from a broad based constituency, preventing the coalition from diffusing issues and limiting support. Multi-issue coalitions can raise people's awareness about the interconnection of many issues rather than sacrificing political depth for numerical strength, even if they do not attract large numbers of supporters at first. Ultimately, both kinds of coalitions are needed to change; one educates masses of people and the other analyzes the underlying causes of problems.



Choosing Allies

A PIRG initiated coalition could begin by looking at other campus organizations for possible allies. Then look to other groups in the community (i.e. unions and labour groups, etc.). Make sure that those most affected by the issue will be well represented in your coalition. Keep in mind that resources and people are already stretched to their limits, so you may need to demonstrate how the coalition is consistent with their organization's goals and objectives in order to bring them on-side.

Establishing Basic Principles



It is critical to the success of your coalition that it doesn't leap into projects without first establishing some kind of basic framework outlining how members will work together. Coalition members should consider:

- What do you see as the real issue and how do you hope working in a coalition will address it?

Record the responses on a blackboard and highlight the commonalities and contradictions. Everyone can then see if a common position can be developed.

- How will decisions be made?

There may be people who come as individuals representing only themselves; others who also represent organizations but have been given the latitude to make decisions at the coalition level without going back to their group; and yet others who represent an organization but are obligated to consult with their group before committing to any action. A coalition's effectiveness can be impaired by a representative's group that insists being involved in every decision, but pulled apart when a coalition does not respect nor accommodate the needs of its constituent organizations.

- What kind of resources (i.e. time, office space) might you commit to the coalition?

These answers will help when coalition members begin to discuss possible actions.



Developing Strategy

Answering the following questions will clarify the kind of actions the coalition could pursue. :

- What is the ideal and what is the reality?
- How do they differ, and what must be changed to achieve the ideal?

The desirable changes may come in awareness about the issue, in policy or legislation, or perhaps election of officials. Different changes will call for different strategies. Introducing basic PIRG action/working group techniques (i.e. effective meeting and goal setting techniques) can greatly increase the effectiveness of the coalition.

Fundraising



Action/working groups are usually provided with a small budget by the PIRG, but many choose to supplement it through fundraising. This section contains some suggestions and considerations for some of the more common PIRG fundraising activities, but how you raise your money is really only limited by your imagination. Be Creative!



Benefits

Live band benefits can be both lucrative and fun. There are two ways to go with them. You can either rent your own hall or work out of a local bar. The hall route requires more organizing (obtaining a liquor license for example), more money up front (hall rental and liquor) and is riskier (if it flops, you will lose money). Working with local bars is safer. There are fewer worries about losing money, and security, staffing, and even some advertising is taken care of. Generally, you will get the cover charge proceeds and if the night is a real success may even kick in a percentage of the bar profits.

A few suggestions:

- Local bands will often play for free for a good cause, especially if they are looking for exposure. Ask around, someone at the PIRG likely has a contact with such a band;
- Take along pamphlets, T-Shirts, your display etc. for both your action/working group and the PIRG;
- Have a spokesperson thank the band and the bar over the sound system (perhaps present them with something, like T-shirts);
- Advertise widely with posters, newspaper ads etc. Try to get the campus newspaper to run a feature on the band before the event for some free advertising;
- If you do rent a hall and want a liquor license, you must obtain it 30 days in advance (get the form at an LCBO outlet).



Raffles

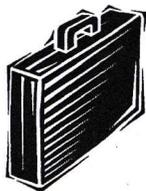
Local merchants can often be persuaded to donate prizes for a raffle in exchange for having their name mentioned in advertising. Check to see if you require a municipal licence. Allow plenty of time (at least a month) for ticket sales and hold the draw at a group event.

Merchandising

Selling T-shirts, coffee mugs, buttons, posters and anything else you can think of does a great job of raising awareness of your issue while you raise money. You can either get your own stuff made (talk to staff for information on suppliers and about the PIRG putting up the initial funds) or sell other groups merchandise on consignment. Rules regarding merchandise sales from display tables vary between campuses. Check with staff about both these rules.



Petitioning Government



There are fairly strict rules and procedures you must follow to petition the various levels of government. Contact your local MP/MPP or municipal office to request a complete set of rules. Make sure that you are petitioning the correct level of government. The language must be respectful. Petitions can be on either letter or legal size paper. The entire text of the petition must appear on each page.

Federal specifics:

- The petition must be addressed: "To the House of Commons".
- The petition must not be altered, commented upon, or have attachments.
- The petition must contain a request, called a "prayer", for Parliament to take some action (or refrain from taking some action) to remedy a grievance. The "prayer" must be clear and to the point, but "must not demand or insist" that Parliament do something.
- The petition must contain a minimum of 25 valid signatures and addresses (full home address or city and province).

Provincial specifics:

- The petition must be addressed to either the Parliament, Legislature or Legislative Assembly of Ontario.
- Each petitioner must print his or her name and address and sign the petition.
- The petition must be free of erasure or insertions.

You will need a member of the corresponding level of government to present your petition. Get prior agreement from this member before you proceed as they are not obligated to submit a petition.

Letter, Phone, & Fax Campaigns



When you are working on a large issue like the James Bay hydro-electric project you can use a letter-writing or phone & fax campaign to put pressure on the groups making the decisions. These tools work well and are quite easy to do. Here is what you do:

- Determine who are your targets (the people who can make the decisions or influence them...) and get their full names, addresses, phone and fax numbers



Letters

- Write up a sample letter for volunteers to use and make copies;
- Usually it works best if people write their own letters, rather than use a form letter, but they are better than nothing;
- Type up names, addresses, etc. on one page and make copies;
- At an information table or event, ask people to either sign a form letter or write their own (on the spot if possible) and sign with their own full name and address;
- Mail them as you get them signed and try to do it in a short time to make more impact.



Phone & Fax

- Get a group of volunteers together and draw up a schedule for making calls or faxes;
- Schedule people 10 minutes apart for calls, more often for faxes;
- At the appointed time, each person calls the office of the decision-maker and asks to speak to them, but usually you won't be able to so tell them why you are calling (e.g. concerned about the proposed mega-project);
- Leave your name and address and ask for a response;
- By fax send your letter and ask for a response;
- The purpose of all this is to tie up the phone lines and the fax lines as much as possible to make your point and by asking for a response you are tying up staff time and re-reinforcing your point.

Planning Events



Every PIRG sets money aside in their budget to support action/working group initiatives – talk to a staff or board person about what your action/working group wants to do. A few of the kinds of events you may consider organizing:

- Speakers Δ Readings Δ Conferences Δ Discussion Groups
- Films Δ Popular Theatre Δ Demonstrations Δ Marches
- Sit Ins Δ Street Closures Δ Civil Disobedience
- Letter Writing Δ Pot Lucks Δ Fundraisers and Benefits
- Concerts Δ Press Conferences
- Info Tables Δ Socials Δ Celebrations



Event Considerations

Although each event will have its own requirements in terms of organization and set up, consider:

- **Goals**
What do you want to achieve with the event? What kind of follow-up or action component should it have? (For example, will people be invited to another event or to a action/working group meeting?)
- **Target Audience**
Who do you want to reach? Are you trying to attract a new audience and not the same old crowd? (For example, do you need to take the event to the audience, should it be off campus?)
- **Timing**
Is it timely? Does it conflict with the plans of other groups? Are students in the middle of exams/out of money? Is there a holiday or long weekend that might interfere?
- **Duplication**
Have there been similar events on the same issue? Would another event be repetitive?
- **Format**
Will it be a speaker, panel, film, debate, etc.?
- **Budget**
How much will it cost? Will it be worth what it costs?

General Event Checklist

- Have you involved staff or board members in the planning of your event?
- Have you sought cosponsors?
- If you are presenting a panel or speaker series, is there gender and ethnic balance? Do you have an experienced moderator?
- Have speakers, venue and equipment been confirmed in writing (and reconfirmed)?
- Are you providing Sign language interpretation and childcare subsidies?
- Have you planned for a PIRG information table at the door? Are there other groups you could invite to put up displays?
- Can the event be recorded?

Venue & Equipment Checklist

- Is the venue affordable, accessible, well known?
- Do you require sound or video equipment that is not provided at the venue and will it be delivered or does it require pick-up?
- Who is responsible for setting up the equipment?
- Are chairs, tables, podium, water and microphones provided at the booked venue?
- Will the venue be open, or do you have to pick up a key prior to the event?

Promotion & Media Checklist

- Who are you targeting as an audience, and are you advertising in the most effective ways and places to reach them?
- Is there another event or activity you can “piggy back” on to gain more exposure and interest?
- Have you prepared and distributed an effective poster? Remember to send some to your cosponsors.
- Does your event warrant a press conference?

- Have you issued a news release? Does it contain the 5 W's (Who, What, Where, When and Why)? Is it on letterhead and recycled paper? Does it include a contact name and number? The news release should go out two to three weeks before the event, and should be sent again on the day before, or early in the morning on the day of the event. Have you followed up on the news release with phone calls?
- Are there spokespeople available for interviews during and following the event?
- Have you sent out a Public Service Announcement (PSA) to those media which offer the service? Remember, it needs to be 30 words or less and it should be sent out three weeks before the event.



Follow-Up Checklist

- It's important after every event to evaluate the planning and organization. Take notes on the strong points and the areas that need work for next time.
- Send letters of thanks to speakers and any other groups or individuals who went out of their way to help make your event happen.
- Clip or videotape media coverage and file in the office.
- Make notes on sympathetic reporters, organizations, etc.



Seeking Co-Sponsors

Co-sponsors essentially do two things: defer costs and increase attendance. Co-sponsors potentially can help to build coalitions by involving more people, but it can mean giving up complete control (but that's o.k.). The more credibility your project has, the greater your chances of finding co-sponsors. In your request, provide as much detail as you can.

Before approaching potential co-sponsors you may want to consider:

- What role the co-sponsoring group is expected to play. Do the co-sponsors work independently on a particular aspect? Do they

deal with the media independently? Or are you just looking for money and prefer to do the work yourselves?

- Get the formal approval of the PIRG board. This enables you to take it to other groups as an official PIRG project.
- Have a budget prepared, with a list of the funding sources you are approaching.
- Let them know what other groups are involved, are interested, or are being approached.
- Know what your project or event is meant to accomplish, and how this will benefit the group you are approaching.
- Acknowledge all co-sponsors on event publicity! Send a thank you note, and invite them to any celebratory occasions planned.



Booking Speakers



Arranging a speaker can be a simple matter of a couple of phone calls and providing directions, or it can be a major production involving negotiation of fees, accommodation and time schedules. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Whenever possible, have one person act as the contact with the speaker or the speaker's agent. When more than one person gets involved, communication gets more complicated which may lead to confusion and frustration for everyone involved.
- Be clear about the purpose of the event, other speakers involved, and who is organizing it.
- What is the speaker's fee? Does the fee include transportation or is that extra? Who will pick the speaker up at the airport/bus/train station?
- Is the speaker willing to be billeted or is a hotel required? If billeted, are there any special requirements (i.e. pet allergies, diet, accessibility, etc.)?

Remember, some speakers often book months, sometimes years in advance. Give as much lead time as possible.

Organizing Demos



Demonstrations can be a powerful way to get your message across, or be a colossal flop. The best advice that anyone can give you about organizing a rally is to plan as carefully as possible. There will be many details that need to be considered and there will always be unexpected problems.

There are a number of excellent manuals/books available that will assist you in planning (see end of this section) or search out someone near you who has previously organized one. There may be considerations particular to your city or university that are important but would not get covered by a manual.

Any rally associated with PIRGs must be legal and based on principles of non-violence. You may also choose to apply these guidelines in organizing an action of civil disobedience, however, PIRGs do not endorse illegal actions.

The time required to organize a successful rally will vary with circumstances. For instance, if you organize a rally to protest a white supremacist concert, it may only take a few days to a week. However, if you are using the rally to raise awareness on an issue such as East Timor you may need four to six weeks (with other events leading up to it).



Establish The Purpose

- Why do you want to have a rally?
- What will you gain from having a rally?
- What is the rally's focus or theme?

Rallies are no longer novel events. It is not uncommon in some cities for more than one rally being planned on the same day, occasionally at the same location! If you are doing it to raise awareness and draw some attention to the issue, you need to be imaginative. The section on Popular Theatre in this manual might help you with some ideas.

It is best to have a rally as a culmination of a series of events and a larger campaign. This will help you develop some momentum for the event, have helped create a network of support, and clarify the reasons for the rally. To simply organize a rally and not pay attention to other forms of organizing is to severely limit the possibility of achieving your goals.



Your Rally Checklist

Keep in mind the purpose of your event as this will often determine many of the details of the rally. For example, suppose you are organizing a rally in order to further a boycott you have initiated. It would probably make more sense, and get more attention, to picket outside the corporations headquarters, or a major distributor, than at a government office.

- Where will you hold it? Is a permit needed? Will it attract the attention of those who you want to influence?
- What resources are required (i.e. time, money, volunteers)? Will you need a p.a. system?
- Who will you invite to the rally (i.e. the media, speakers, honorary guests, other organizations)?
- Who will come to the rally? Do you need to bus people in? Will those in opposition to you show up (e.g. pro-war demonstrators to an anti-war rally, neo-nazi's to an anti-nazi rally, etc.)?
- Are there any important negative considerations to the time, place or date (e.g. the morning of December 25th would be a bad choice)?
- How will you publicize the rally – posters, radio, flyers, class speaks?
- How will you insure that the rally remains peaceful? Will you train monitors? Put it on publicity materials?



Popular Education

Popular education is often described as "education for critical consciousness". It is a process for strengthening popular organizations. It acts on behalf of production-oriented groups of the politically marginalized. It is aimed at ending economic exploitation, political domination, cultural dependency, and at building a new more humane and just society.



Characteristics of Popular Education

- Everyone teaches, everyone learns;
- The starting point is the concrete experience of the learner;
- Involves a high level of participation;
- Is a collective effort;
- Is an ongoing process;
- Leads to action for change;
- Stresses the creation of new knowledge;
- Causes us to reflect on what we've done to improve what we are going to do;
- Strengthens the ability of people to organize themselves;
- And it's fun!

Popular education is an ideal learning tool for action/working groups. There are many popular education resources filled with exercises and games you can use in your group and to educate others.



An Example of a Popular Education Tool

The Learning Tree is a great brainstorming tool. As a group brainstorm about an issue using a tree drawn on a blackboard or a large piece of paper.

- Branches = symptoms. How do you know there is a problem?
- Trunk = causes of the symptoms.
- Roots = institutions that support the cause.
- Leaves = solutions to the problem, keeping in mind not only the symptoms but the causes and institutions that support the causes.
- Fruit = ideals. What would the ideal world be like?

Popular Theatre



Popular Theatre is any kind of skit, song, puppet show, rap, dance and/or combination thereof, which is created to explore issues and entertain spectators. Anything goes and anyone can do it!

➤ Role Play

Actors assume an identity and play out a scenario. This can ground a theoretical discussion of an issue in a more personal way. For instance, racism within an office could be explored using a scenario where one actor tells another that she is always late because that is the way her people operate. The audience could then discuss the effects of damaging stereotypes.

➤ Sketches/Skits/Street Theatre

These are scripted or improvised dramatizations that can be repeatedly performed in high traffic public spaces to provoke passers-by to think about an issue (and perhaps stop at an educational display). Making large costumes, masks and/or disguises can also add to this kind of popular theatre as does music and singing!

➤ Stop Theatre

During this kind of sketch, members of the audience shout 'stop' when they don't like what is going on and replace the actor. During a skit about 'ending the silence about violence' an audience member replaced an actor who was silent when told by another actor that the loud shouting going on at the neighbours 'always happened and was to be ignored'. This new actor continued the scene attempting to 'end the silence'.

➤ Puppets

Too shy to be an actor? Express your creativity using puppets! The Puppets Against AIDS tour which came to Canada from South Africa in 1992 inspired hundreds of people to create their own skits about AIDS, educating themselves and others about a very important, yet sometimes hard-to-talk-about, topic.

A note about playwrighting: You don't have to write down every line or be entirely original. Borrowing and improvising (making up what you're going to say and do at the time of performing) saves time and is also fun and spontaneous!

Preparing Posters



Posters will probably be your main way of communicating with your target audience.

A few things to keep in mind:

- The title of your event is BIG and attention-grabbing
- Use compelling graphics – diverse and representative
- Terminology is gender-inclusive
- The time, date and place of the event is clear
- The cost is indicated
- It says sponsored by the PIRG, the PIRG LOGO is on it, cosponsors are named, and you have a phone number for more information
- Use either one-side-used or recycled paper (and indicate which on the bottom of the poster)
- Indicate if your event is wheelchair accessible and if you are offering sign-language interpretation

Do Not:

- Clutter the poster with too much writing (use point form)
- Use graphics without checking copyright rules

Remember To:

- Plan your poster well in advance
- Check university posting regulations and distribute poster to all high traffic areas and throughout the city if the event is open to the public
- Start a graphics file of relevant cartoons and other drawings
- Save a printed copy of your poster

Producing Pamphlets



A pamphlet is among the best ways to promote your issue and action/working group. A good one will get your message across quickly and clearly.

Here are a few pointers on how to go about it.

Content

- Don't overload it with too much information and write in succinct plain language
- Use graphics or photographs
- Use a "hook" in the title and/or introduction. Often a question or shocking (but true!) statement will work. For example, "Forgotten Genocide: The Story of East Timor" rather than "The East Timor Action Group". Think of the issue rather than the group.
- Spend some time examining other pamphlets in the office. Chances are that the best ideas for presentation have been thought of before.
- Don't forget to include information on how people can take action.

Production

- Have a clean original that can be copied on to coloured/recycled/reused paper. Alternatively, get it printed professionally. Appearance is very important.
- Check out the PIRG Operating Manual. It has a detailed section on leaflets, pamphlets, posters etc. that is sure to be useful. Ask a staff person where to find it.

Using The Media

Publicizing with a variety of media can amplify your message and expand your audience. The media can also play a role in setting the agenda for political debate and public discourse.



Effective Communication

- Know your local media: their names, their work, their biases, strong and weak points, and deadlines.
- Have one media contact person from your action/working group. This helps establish personal contact and creates continuity and consistency.
- Always assume that anything you express to the media will be used. It doesn't matter if you tell them it's 'off the record' (there is no such thing).
- Take advantage of photo opportunities or events that will attract the media and give colour to the coverage.
- Emphasize what is being done and how you are taking action.
- Highlight the local relevance of your issue. Think of hooks to draw media into your story. (e.g. tropical rain forest destruction as a hook to propel us into the discussion of deforestation in Canada)
- Have tangible examples on hand that help make your point. If you avoid the abstract or theoretical arguments you will reach more people.
- If you don't have all the facts, SAY SO! Get back to them with the pertinent information or with some research under your belt.
- Avoid jargon, acronyms and abbreviations.
- Don't assume that reporters or the public will know the history of the issue. Short backgrounders are always useful. A resource list of experts or authorities that can verify information can help the journalist out.
- Thank journalists for good articles and give them opportunities for follow-up articles.

News Releases



The purpose of a news release is:

- To announce upcoming events (a public service announcement is sometimes more suitable – an example of a PSA is the "Upcoming Community Events" section in the local newspaper).
- To announce your stand on an issue
- To give background info or supplementary info to a news item.

Finally, consider which editorial desk your news release should go to. Often the news desk is not your only choice. There may be other interested desks: family, life, education, university, world issues, etc.

How to write a news release:

- No longer than one page.
- At the top of the page write 'For Immediate Release'.
- A catchy headline.
- Cover who, what, where, when, why. The first paragraph should stand on its own as the hook, and answer at least 2 of the five W's. As the reader moves down the page the items should lessen in importance. Make sure you include a quotes. At the end of the copy write '30' (a journalistic convention that indicates the release is ended).
- Include the contact person from your action/working group – their name and phone number. It's a good idea to have more than one contact.
- Use letterhead! Letterhead is the property of the PIRG and anything printed on it must be cleared by staff and/or the board of directors.

Writing Grants



For large projects consider applying for a grant. Present your grant idea to PIRG staff and/or the board of directors for approval as the PIRG will be responsible for administration of the grant monies.

Which grant? Your project will be much better suited to some grants than others. Picking the appropriate one will greatly increase your chances of success. Talk to the granting agency up front and outline your idea. They will tell you if your proposal has a chance.

- Talk to the granting agency staff. They will likely give you hints about what the selection committee looks for.
- Answer all the questions. You would be surprised at how many incomplete proposals are submitted – and rarely looked at.
- Your proposal must demonstrate that you have the resources and expertise to carry the project through.
- Grant application forms tend to be similarly structured. Spend some time reading successful applications. You can probably get copies of several from PIRG staff people.
- Be succinct and focused. A well written proposal is much more likely to succeed.
- Point out probable spin-off benefits and projects.
- Include a detailed budget – even if it isn't asked for. This shows that the project has been thought through. Including other financial backers also shows that other groups think the project is worthwhile.
- Include names and phone numbers of "experts consulted".
- Stress the volunteer component. It is often helpful to assign a realistic cash value to volunteer time and material donations and include them in the budget. This shows that the total value of the project is higher than the amount of money being asked for.
- Tell the granting agency what they will get out of it. For example, "Moneybags Granting Agency's name will be included on all publications and be mentioned at events".
- Get your proposal proof read.

APPENDICES

"Why Are We Here?" Goal Setting Exercise

Materials: Post-it Notes (or scraps of paper), pencils, tape, some wall space to stick or tape the post-it notes to.

Each member reflects on the following questions and fills out at least 10 post-it notes with one response on each note, without discussion:

- > Why have you joined the group?
- > What do you hope to get out of the group?
- > What do you hope to contribute to the group?

When everyone has completed their personal brainstorming one person volunteers to offer one of their responses, and so it goes around the circle. With each contribution the facilitator takes the post-it note and places it on the wall or board and in this way, cluster similar responses together with the help of the group. The group will also help the facilitator come up with name headings for each cluster. Once all of the post-it notes have been shared and clustered, similar headings can be grouped in order to condense the number of headings, if this seems appropriate.

- i.e.)
- Socializing
 - working with like-minded individuals
 - being part of a fun group
 - Sharing Skills
 - Work on Issues of Concern
 - environmental issues
 - native rights

These might be examples of headings and subheadings that come up in the meeting, but be open minded, anything is possible. Even jokes, or silly responses can serve to inform the group as to where people are coming from and what they may have to offer the group. This much of the exercise is interesting in itself but further processing can be helpful too.

Note how much the group has in common. See if there are gaps in the resources of the group where you might have to reach out for help. Observe where there are differences and how they might compliment one another. Remember the facilitator guides the group through discussion and does not need to know all the answers. See Resource Manual for a Living Revolution pages 61-67.

Consensus: Possible Solutions To Some Common Problems



Possible Solutions if ...

... someone is disrespectful to others, sexist, racist or condescending

- Restate the original values and norms of the group, "We originally agreed to value each other's opinions, even if we disagree";
- Appeal to consensus rules;
- Remind them that we are all equal.

... someone is sulking, uncooperative

- Pull them back in, "We need to hear your reaction to the last suggestion";
- Say directly to the person, "Everyone's ideas are needed" or "It is important in consensus that everyone share their views".

... someone is only hearing the first words people say, then cut them off, or dominating the conversation

- Use a 'talking stone' to help people talk who have been cut off;
- Review consensus rules;
- Have time limit for speakers which facilitators enforce;
- Use a 5 second rule: no one can speak until 5 seconds after someone else has finished speaking;
- Directly address what's going on;
- The facilitator should thank them for their opinion and ask another member for theirs;
- Encourage people to self-facilitate.

... someone is attacking the person not the issue

- Name the behaviour, "Let's discuss the issue here";
- Encourage people to be constructive, not destructive.

... someone is taking everything personally

- Remind them that their viewpoint is important, but we need to hear everyone's views for consensus;

... someone is withdrawn, not participating

- Chat individually at break time to draw them out, gain their confidence;
- Do not single them out, have a go around;
- Positive reinforcement for their suggestions when they do participate;
- Provide periods of silence so there is room to speak, 5 second rule;
- Do not interrupt when they are speaking.

... meetings are regularly too long

- Set time limits at the beginning of the meeting and stick to it;
- If you are going to extend one agenda item, agree (by consensus) to shorten the time for a less important item;
- Have strict facilitation, use speaking stone and speaking time limits;
- Clarify what decisions need to be made;
- Write it up as a clear question for all to see and keep referring back to it to keep discussion on track;
- Set agenda and time limit for the next week's meeting at the end of each meeting;
- Time keeper use hand signals for "time up" when someone is rambling or dominating;
- Summarize rambler's points;
- Keep a speakers list;
- Review problems in the meetings every so often.

... people bring their own (hidden) agendas to dominate the meeting

- Make sure that the agenda is reviewed and agreed to by the group before the meeting begins;
- If discussion wanders then refer back to the agenda as the agreed topics of debate;

- Ask questions and encourage everyone to bring out all their issues/concerns.

...members of your group have extreme views (polarization)

- Facilitator can stress that compromise is important to reach consensus;
- Recognize the validity of dissenting groups;
- Allow time for emotions to cool down, take a break;
- Make sure everyone agrees on what the common goal/objective is to keep the group focused.

...people avoiding conflict, giving in, always trying to be nice, then feeling resentment

- Talk to quieter members on breaks to find out their views and encourage them to speak during the meeting, don't speak for them;
- Clearly state how important dissent is within the consensus process, and that without the views of all members, the best decision cannot be arrived at;
- Don't be angry with someone who disagrees;
- 'Clear the air', ask people to state any problems that they might have with a decision before consensus is reached, do a go around;
- Don't rush consensus, seek out disagreement "I sense that you have reservations that need to be discussed more";
- Leave spaces for quiet/shy people to provide input.

Resources

Resources used in preparation of this guide:

Organizing: A Guide for Grassroots Leaders,
by Si Kahn, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1982.

A New Weave, Rick Arnold et al., Toronto, OISE/CUSO, 1985.

Educating for Change, Between the Lines and the Doris Marshall Institute, Toronto, 1991.

*Resource Manual For A Living Revolution:
A handbook of skills and tools for social change activists*,
Virginia Coover et al., New Society Publishers, 1985.

Midwest Academy Organizing Manual,
10th Anniversary Edition, 1984, 600 W. Fullerton Ave., Chicago,
Illinois, 60614, (312) 975-3670.

Information on your PIRG

This booklet is a general guide to how PIRGs operate. For information specific to your PIRG, get in touch with the staff or board of your local PIRG.

Acknowledgements

A modest proposal by WPIRG board members Jennifer Anderson, Joanne Bender, Suzanne Galloway and staff member Daryl Novak blossomed into the February 1994 first edition with generous contributions from OPIRG staff members Len Bush, Michael Crummey, Karen Farbridge, Heather Farrow, Karen Hawley, Mike Pearson, Judi Varga-Toth, and Linda Vieregge. Editing, design, and layout by Daryl Novak and Linda Vieregge.

Help other activists!

Send your thoughtful comments to WPIRG, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, N2L 3G1. Email: info@wpirg.org

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