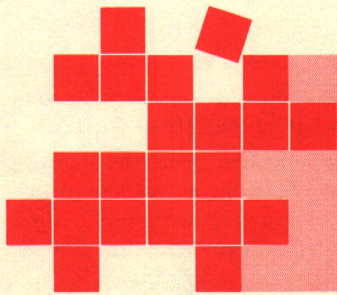


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# How Involved Will People Get?

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## Analyzing Available Group Resources and Tasks

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"We certainly could use some new blood."

"Our attendance has really fallen off."

"How in the world do you get people to serve as officers?"

We all hear remarks such as these from all sides.

Today many, if not all, organizations face involvement problems. Members are becoming more and more resistant, unwilling to become really involved or fully committed. Rounding up workers for projects and/or convincing persons to serve as officers is becoming more and more frustrating. Many organizations are experiencing sizable drops in membership. Why?

Women are returning to work and school; they are assuming new roles. Men and women have reached the saturation point. They are tired of putting in long hours on thankless tasks; they see little point in attending dull meetings and are re-evaluating their entire organizational involvement.

Many people are **finally** learning to say "NO." The army of volunteers is shrinking.

In spite of these and other warning signals, organizations continue to function as they have in the past:

Is your organization open to change? Or do you:

- continue to schedule the same activities year after year?
- ask the same people to work on the same projects?
- delegate responsibilities on the basis of the same offices and committees?
- rehash the same program materials via the same old program formats?

"Once a good money maker, always a good money maker" seems to be the philosophy. Certain organizations do have success with annual events, and the community looks forward to them—even expects them to occur.

Nevertheless, too many organizations limit themselves to annual activities that vary little from year to year. Changing memberships demand changing participation options, and lack of membership involvement is often a symptom of other difficulties in the organization.

### What Does Involvement Cost?

Involvement in any organization has "costs." They may be computed in terms of time, money, effort, etc.—the tangible "costs." There are also less tangible "costs," and it may be these that people are unwilling to accept. People do not like to risk embarrassment or losing esteem; they dislike rudeness and discourtesy; many avoid situations where they doubt their ability to do well or those where they may be rejected.

Today most group members have alternatives. Benefits of involvement in another group may seem better; the costs of involvement elsewhere may be less.

Leisure-time activities and primary groups such as the family can and do compete in offering fellowship, recognition and the feeling of doing important things. There are many "good" organizations and activities bidding for one's time, money and energy. And those who for so long "did for free" are now experiencing the pangs of doubt: "I want to be paid for my time, too."

Persons have a right to know what benefits will accrue because of their work/involvement. What is meaningful to one person may be of doubtful value to another. Consequently, leaders seeking to motivate and involve must know their membership and their needs as well as the tasks that need doing and the benefits that involvement can offer.

Prestige and esteem are one type of benefit from doing an organizational job. Friendship or fellowship can be attractive benefits. A sense of participation in a valuable "cause" may appeal to some. Developing leadership skills and/or gaining information may provide another type of benefit.

Often the person trying to motivate others to do "something" does not fully understand what that "something" is. Before you can ask for participation or involvement, there are a few things you need to know. The questions below indicate several:

1. What do you want the member to do? (Come and sit in meetings? Why? Serve on committees? Why?)
2. What are the specifics of the "job?" What skills and time are required?
3. Why is the "job" important to the success of the organization?

"Askers" need to be truthful in their job descriptions. Overselling a job as requiring "little" may result in little being done, or conversely, much being done begrudgingly by a doer who vows "never again." Commitment to the group and/or full support of the project are necessary ingredients if the worker is to be depended upon.

## How Healthy Is Your Group?

Lack of membership involvement is often a symptom of other, more serious difficulties. An organization may be guilty of any number of the following conditions:

1. The benefits from attending meetings or participating in activities are not considered very valuable by the members.
2. The meetings are boring.
3. The general membership may not have much opportunity to take an active part.
4. The members may think the same clique of people runs the organization year after year.
5. The members feel their participation would not make much difference and they have little influence on programs and policies.
6. The activity open to most of the members in any given meeting does not seem important to them.

One or more of these situations need not doom the organization; rather, awareness of problems can become a stout handle for improving group morale and modifying procedures. Organizations can change if the membership wants them to change.

## Is Feedback Working?

Availability of feedback channels cannot be over emphasized. What is the membership thinking? Feeling? What do they like? Dislike? Information from feedback exchanges may not be very complimentary, but it is usually enlightening. How much opportunity for feedback exists in your organization? As a leader, are you listening?

One point of view is that if people are asked to do what they **can do** and like to do, there is no involvement problem. People can and do find time and energy for the assignments they enjoy doing. How often have you been asked what you **like** to do? **Don't like** to do? How often are you asked to do what you are trained to do? Seldom, on all counts, if you are like most people.

A valuable tool for any leader who seeks to maximize involvement of membership is a membership inventory. It assists leaders in "getting a reading" on each member's interests and skills as well as the kind of involvement he or she

is willing to assume. Finding out the preferred kind or type of work schedule and desired kind of training provides additional information to aid the leader in making plans.

A telephone survey can yield this type of information. Some groups use the telephone survey to build a membership file of "promises." When a member tells a caller, "I won't be an officer, but I'll work on the salad luncheon in May," this promise is recorded, and appropriate follow-up is made. If someone says, "I can't take on anything more for the coming year, but next year I will have more time," this information is noted also and made available to officers next year.

Women's groups often complain that younger members, women with young children, can't and don't participate. Such organizations seldom offer help to the young mother so she can participate. Instead, they put her on a telephone committee or assign her "at-home tasks" that offer her little opportunity for socializing or interaction outside the home. And most young mothers agree, home-bound children **resent** having "mommy on the phone" and are "hell on wheels" any time Mom starts dialing. Substituting as "Granny" to allow the young Mom to do away-from-home organizational work is a concrete way that older women can ease young-old differences within organizations. Some groups offer babysitting arrangements.

## Who Plans For Doers?

Planner-doer differences may lead to less than total commitment or involvement. What are the potential consequences of planning at one level in an organization what is to be done at another level?

1. Doers feel less satisfaction when they carry out someone else's plan.
2. Doers are less motivated to make somebody else's plan succeed—less confident that it can or will succeed.
3. Doers have less flexibility to modify or freedom to make improvements if they are carrying out somebody else's plan.
4. Doers may not understand the assigned plan as well as if they had planned it themselves.
5. Human resources may not be used as well as they could and should be.

Doers know what they are able to do and what is beyond their scope.

6. Communication problems increase. There are more errors and distortions when follow-through comes about after instructions are given.
7. Planner-doer competition may develop. There is no sense of "our" but rather "your" and "my."

It is not always possible to avoid the planner-doer syndrome, but there are ways to minimize the potential problems. If you are involved in planning for other doers, keep in mind the following suggestions:

1. Be clear and explicit in setting forth objectives of the plan; make certain the doers understand **why** they are to do something.
2. Provide sufficient feedback opportunities so that doers can determine progressively "how they are doing."
3. Enable some key doers to be "in on" the planning or parts of it, so that their feedback can be incorporated into the plan.
4. Stay flexible; make modification by doers possible.
5. Be sure the plan is clear and the instructions simple; use at least two media for giving the instructions, for example, oral and written.
6. Use the same language (keep the vocabulary constant between planner and doer); guarantee two-way communication.

## Why Won't People Serve?

One of the most difficult jobs many organizations face is finding people to be officers. Why? Are refusals based on lack of skills? Does holding office require too much time? Are year-long offices passé? A few of the more common reasons for refusing to hold office are identified below:

1. Some people lack the confidence and/or skills they perceive as necessary for holding office. How much skill training does your organization provide? Are you really concerned with developing leadership?
2. Officer descriptions are often vague, out of date or non-existent. People hesitate to accept office under such

circumstances, especially when criticism of officers is well known and frequently pointed.

3. Assuming the same responsibility for a year or more does not appeal to an increasing number of people; many seek to avoid a "long" or continuing commitment.
4. Task rather than role orientation appeals to busy people.
5. Officer orientation connotes stratification of power and responsibility which goes against group-centered, shared leadership notions.

One would hope that all organizations feel a responsibility to help members grow, to develop opportunities for training in leading meetings, program planning, being a recorder, parliamentary procedure, etc. In such areas, organizations can best work together. Why should four different groups in a town set up "duplicate" training programs? Or perhaps the adult education program of the school could offer the desired courses at night.

Most organizations need to re-examine their bylaws in terms of present-day needs and practices. Why elect people to offices that are no longer meaningful? After all, it is possible to change bylaws!

Persons associated with a particular office in recent years can best describe

the job. Developing new job profiles is a good place to start. Enumerating the activities of the organization and the resulting responsibilities provides one basis for determining the tasks that need doing. This information, coupled with information derived from member inventories, gives group leaders the necessary insight to design the programs of the organization. If people can't or won't do certain tasks, there is no point in setting up projects that will demand that kind of input.

### **How Do Task Forces Work?**

Rethinking your organizational work in terms of task forces may give a boost to participant lethargy. Task force structures vary from organization to organization and should, to some extent, vary from year to year. Typically, however, most groups think in terms of:

1. member relations and communication
2. program planning
3. fund raising
4. member and worker recruitment
5. evaluation
6. community relations
7. social activities
8. special projects

Task forces are somewhat akin to committees. They usually: have more specific

assignments, need not be continuing groups, may concentrate their efforts during a relatively short time span. The latter feature appeals to persons who would rather work hard for a short period than be "bothered" on a regular basis.

Task forces and committees offer these advantages:

1. Smaller groups provide more opportunity for participation.
2. Procedures in small groups are more informal; individuals may feel more free to contribute and be honest with one another.
3. If members are "hand picked" for the job, they are likely to be more enthusiastic.
4. Delicate, embarrassing or controversial subjects can be handled more easily.
5. A small group can operate more efficiently; much time can be saved by having alternatives narrowed.

But in the final analysis, the degree of member involvement is related to the perceived worth in the organization and its activities. If credibility of the organization is high, if membership and participation is viewed as an honor or privilege, if programs are believed worthy, members **will** find the time to become involved.

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