Chapter 1: Develop a Local Group
Introduction

Why is community organizing so important? Because social change takes place and is most effective when people work together in an organized way. This gives us the power we need to achieve the changes we want. Forming and working in a local group can also create new connections in our communities and build a culture of collaborative action that can lay the foundation for long-term change.

You Can Make a Difference

In a true democracy, people would have a real voice in the decisions affecting their lives. Politics would be a dynamic, active, creative process in which people participate meaningfully. Governments and corporations would be directly accountable to the people they affect.

Unfortunately, many of us feel that we have no voice in governing our society and that a few powerful individuals and corporations have too much power and influence. We may be too busy to participate, we may lack information, or we may be discouraged. We may think that no one else feels the way we do.

Despite all these obstacles, people do act, and their actions do create change. The changes that have most improved peoples' lives in this century were not gifts given to us by "experts," but the hard-won results of organizing by "ordinary" people. Large-scale victories that we read about in history books, including progress in the civil rights movement, women securing the right to vote, and the establishment of environmental protection laws were not won by a handful of well-known activists but by the hard work of countless individuals working for change in their own communities.

When we act as individuals our actions may seem small and unimportant, but when we act collectively in our community - neighborhood, workplace, school, small town, county, state, bioregion, wherever our community exists, - anything is possible.

Making the decision to participate in public life is no small thing. It demands commitment, sacrifice, and an openness to change. The rewards are many: new skills, a sense of purpose, work that is enjoyable and meaningful, awareness of how our society operates, and a feeling of community that comes from working together with others for the vision of a better world.

This chapter of the toolkit focuses on ways to form and maintain active, effective, and supportive community groups, the building blocks of democracy.

Starting a Group: First Steps

Research Existing Groups

The idea of forming a new group to work on genetic engineering and other issues can be very exciting. Before deciding to start a new group, though, it is helpful to find out if a group already exists with a similar purpose to what you have in mind. Check with GEAN to find out if there are other GE activists in your area or local groups near the place that you live by calling 563-432-6735 or emailing info@geaction.org. You can also see if there is a directory that lists groups in your community or region, browse the web, review lists of organizations at the closest library, and look for posters on local bulletin boards.

If there are established organizations doing the work you want to do, it might be better to join that group. Another option is to start a local chapter of a state or national organization, like the Sierra Club, or if a local chapter already exists, form a committee in the group that will focus on genetic engineering issues. However, even if there are other like-minded organizations around, you may have a different set of priorities or wish to use different strategies, and therefore, want to start a new group.

Whatever the situation, it is helpful to talk to other grassroots organizers to learn what has already been done on the issue and what has and has not worked. After this background work, you may decide to start a group or local chapter of an existing group.

The First Meeting

To start a local group to resist genetic engineering, you may want to arrange a meeting for a small group of people you know who share your interests and concerns. The goal of this initial meeting could be to plan a more public meeting or event to launch the group in the community. You can identify people for the initial meeting by word of mouth or small-scale advertising.

At the first meeting, spend time getting to know each other. Why did everyone come? What concerns them about genetic engineering? This is a good way to start building connections with one another and to help everyone understand the variety of reasons that people get involved. You may be surprised by the range of interests and concerns that bring people to this issue.

Plan a Public Education Event

Consider what would be the best kick-off for the group. Because genetic engineering is a relatively new issue to most Americans, you may want to start by holding a public education event, which you can follow up with the first organizational meeting for the new group. Since there are so many reasons to be concerned about genetic engineering, a well-planned educational event can be a great motivator to bring people into the movement. You can give a short presentation followed by questions and answers, show a movie and hold a discussion afterwards, or invite a guest speaker.

Consider your Community

As you begin to plan this public event, think about potential members of your group. Who in the community shares an interest in the issue? How does genetic engineering affect different peoples' lives? Who might we be forgetting to include that we do not normally interact with?

From this discussion, make a list of potential supporters and all the concerns you share with each one. This can help you to plan a more persuasive approach to people.

For genetic engineering activist groups, it is important to involve farmers in your work from an early stage and listen to their concerns. Farmers are, in many ways, most directly impacted by genetic engineering, and it is important that they are a part of this movement. There are many other groups to consider when doing outreach for your first public meeting: parents, native plant groups, indigenous groups, environmental groups, safe food groups, public health advocates, and university sustainable agriculture researchers. Make an effort to think of a wide-ranging and diverse group of people to invite to the first public meeting, representing as many different sectors of your community as you can (farmers, scientists, parents, people of different races, ages, and classes, a balance of men and women, etc). Do not wait until later meetings to try to make the group more diverse; start from the very beginning.

Organize the Event

With your community in mind, begin planning the details and logistics of the meeting. Set a date, find a meeting location, and plan publicity. Also, decide on who will facilitate the event, who will bring a sign-in sheet, who will arrive early to open and set up the room, who will bring refreshments, etc. Divide responsibility for these jobs among the members of the first meeting. This will make sure that no one person has too much on their plate, and it will expand the number of people who feel ownership over the public meeting and the new movement you are creating in your community.

You will also want to determine the date and location of a follow-up planning meeting before you hold the public event. A week or so after the public event is a good time for a follow-up meeting, while the information about the issue is still fresh in people’s minds. Make small quarter-page flyers to give to all the attendees of the educational event about the follow-up meeting; let them know the time, location, and a contact number they can call for more information, and explain that this will be the first organizational meeting of a new group forming to resist genetic engineering. Remember that the educational meeting is just a first step in letting your community know about the hazards of genetic engineering. The follow-up planning meeting is when you will bring other community members into the movement and begin to determine the structure of the group.

Inform people of the public event at least two weeks in advance, through letters, postcards, email notices, newspaper and radio announcements, or flyers. Review the list you created at the first meeting of individuals and organizations that might support the new group and make sure they all receive a notice. Follow this up with phone calls to the groups or individuals you want to be sure come to the meeting, no more than a week before the meeting. This gives you an opportunity to explain the issues and take note of people's concerns. Childcare, as well as carpooling or providing transportation, will make it easier for some people to attend and will increase the chances of a good turnout.

At the Public Event

Be sure to have a sign-in sheet on a clipboard, with pen attached that is passed around to all the attendees. You want to be sure to collect everyone’s contact information (name, phone number, mailing address, email address, etc.). It will be important to keep track of the group who comes to the first educational event, as these people will likely be instrumental in helping establish and kick off the new organization. See the “Resources” chapter for a sample sign-in sheet. Also, bring along educational materials that people can take home and share with their families and friends.

Announce the follow-up meeting at the start and the end of the public education event. Let attendees know that this will be their chance to help start a group to make change on this issue in your community.

Be sure to thank everyone for coming, and be sure to thank everyone from the initial meeting for his/her work in organizing the public event. Remember that there is no such thing as thanking volunteers too much for the work they do!

Plan the Follow-up Meeting

Divide the list of people who came to the public meeting among your initial core group. A few days before the follow-up meeting, call everyone who came to the first public meeting and remind them about the time and meeting place. If there are groups or individuals you thought of at the initial meeting who didn't come to the public meeting, call them, too, and invite them to the follow-up meeting. If possible, call everyone who expressed interest in coming to the follow-up meeting again the day before the meeting.

The goal of the next few group meetings will be to establish the mission of the organization and the way the group wants to work together. The rest of this chapter of the toolkit is designed to help you through this process.

Legal Structure Options

Eventually, your group will likely need to determine which legal structure you would like to adopt. If your group intends to raise money, it is particularly important to choose a legal structure that is best suited to your group.

Why set up a legal organization for your GE-Free group?

- To get a tax ID number (to set up a bank account);
- To comply with federal and state tax laws;
- To be able to offer tax deductibility for large donors and foundations;
- If doing “lobbying” activity, to comply with federal and state political practices laws;
- To get an Employer Identification Number (to be able to pay employees and file taxes)

Setting up a legal structure can also help solidify the way your group makes decisions and communicates with one another, and can help the group seem more “established” in the eyes of the public, decision-makers, and donors.

There are a few key considerations to take into account when determining the most appropriate legal organization for your group:

- Will you be doing any, much, or mostly “direct” or “indirect” lobbying activity? (see attached memo on this)
    - If yes, you most likely cannot primarily be a 501c3 nonprofit, and must be a 501c4 or some form of Political Action Committee
    - If no, you could choose any structure that feels most appropriate for your group.

There are a few different legal structures you can establish:

1. *No legal structure:* You can still set up a bank account and receive donations. Most foundations do not give grants to groups that are not official IRS non-profit organizations and that do not have fiscal sponsors. You will not able to offer tax deductibility to major donors. This restricts your ability to receive funds, but if funding needs are limited, many individuals are willing to give contributions to groups without 501(c)3 status.
2. *501(c)3 Public Benefit non-profit:* You can set up a bank account, receive donations, offer tax deductibility for major donors and foundations, and pay people. You also must have a governing board, do some legal filing(a lot of filing if you do any lobbying), and you cannot do any more than 5% of lobbying as defined by the IRS. It can be time-consuming and costly to set up a non-profit, but if you can find a local lawyer willing to donate time for filing, becoming a 501(c)3 could be a good option for better-established groups.
3. *Fiscal sponsorship:* Instead of becoming your own non-profit, another 501(c)3 may be willing to be your “fiscal sponsor.” This would allow you to accept tax-deductible donations from individuals and foundations. If your group becomes a fiscally-sponsored project of a non-profit organization, you can set up a bank account, receive tax-deductible donations, and pay people. Your fiscal sponsor’s board of directors would officially govern you, and there would be some legal filing to do, either by you or the sponsor depending on your agreement with them. Some fiscally-sponsored groups are allowed to do some lobbying, while others are not; it depends on the relationship with the sponsor.
4. *501(c)4 Public Benefit Non-Profit and Political Action Committees:* If your group is going to be primarily engaged in lobbying, as defined by the IRS, you would want to

become a 501(c)4. For most grassroots groups, this is not necessary, as only paid staff time is considered official "lobbying" by the IRS. But if you are a non-profit or if you have a fiscal sponsor, it is important to be familiar with lobbying restrictions, or you could jeopardize your 501(c)3 status.

Fiscal sponsorship is a good option for many grassroots groups that are not at a point of needing to have their own 501(c)3. To find a fiscal sponsor, you can ask other non-profits in your community who have a similar mission if they would be willing to take your group on as a project, or you could be umbrellaed by an organization whose mission is to be a fiscal sponsor for progressive groups. The Tides Foundation in the Bay Area and Third Sector New England in Boston are two examples of these. Most fiscal sponsors charge a certain percent of either money you spend or money you receive to perform the services they provide for your group. For grassroots groups, the average percentage paid to sponsors is 5-8%. To find out more about fiscal sponsorship, please visit the Foundation Center, http://fdncenter.org/for_individuals/fiscal_sponsorship/0702.html, or contact GEAN at 563-432-6735 or info@geaction.org.

Drawn from Californians for GE-Free Agriculture, Occidental Arts and Ecology Center, Resources for Organizing and Social Change

Meeting Agendas and Facilitation

People often say that they "don't like to go to meetings." This is oftentimes because they haven't been to well-run meetings. A carefully prepared, well-facilitated meeting can be momentum-building and, believe it or not, fun! Making sure that your group meetings are running smoothly is an important component of keeping the group together and making sure that your campaign work is on track.

There are a lot of different ideas about how to run a good meeting, and many different ways to make decisions as a group.

Overview

Some of the ingredients of good meetings are:

- Commonly understood goals;
- A clear process for reaching those goals;
- An awareness that people come with their personal preoccupations and feelings as well as in interest in the subject at hand; and
- A sense of involvement and empowerment (people feeling that the decisions are their decisions; that they are able to do what needs doing).

While there is no foolproof way to insure successful meetings, there are a number of guidelines that will go a long way toward helping groups to meet both joyfully and productively. Most people can learn how to facilitate a good meeting but it does take some time and attention. The more people within a group who are aware of good group process skills, the easier the task of the facilitator and the more satisfactory the meeting.

What is a facilitator?

A facilitator is not quite the same as a leader or chairperson, but more like a clerk in a Quaker meeting. A facilitator accepts responsibility to help the group accomplish a common task: to move through the agenda in the time available and to make necessary decisions and plans for implementation.

A facilitator makes no decisions for the group, but suggests ways that will help the group to move forward. He or she works in such a way that the people present at the meeting are aware that they are in charge, that it is their business that is being conducted, and that each person has a role to play.

It is important to emphasize that the responsibility of the facilitator is to the group and its work rather than to the individuals within the group. Furthermore, a person with a high stake in the issues discussed will have a more difficult task functioning as a good facilitator.

Agenda Planning

If at all possible, plan the agenda before the meeting. It is easier to modify it later than to start from scratch at the beginning of the meeting. If very few agenda items are known before the meeting starts, try to anticipate by thinking about the people who will be there and what kind of process will be helpful to them.

It is also helpful to have an agenda chart that can be posted on a wall or written on a blackboard for everyone to see. You can also make copies to give out to everyone at the meeting. A sample chart is included in this section of the Toolkit.

In the agenda include:

1. Something to gather people, to bring their thoughts to the present, to make them recognize each other's presence (singing, silence, brief mention of good things that have happened to people lately, etc.);
2. Agenda Review: It's a good idea to have the agenda written on large sheets of newsprint or on a blackboard so that everybody can see it. By reviewing the agenda, the facilitator can give the participants a chance to modify the proposed agenda and then to contract to carry it out.
3. Main Items: If more than one item needs to be dealt with, it is important to set priorities:
    - If at all possible, start with something that can be dealt with reasonably easily. This will give the group a sense of accomplishment and energy.
    - The more difficult or lengthier items, or those of most pressing importance, come next. If there are several, plan to have quick breaks between them to restore energy and attention (just a stretch in place, a rousing song, a quick game).
    - A big item may be broken into several issues and discussed one at a time to make it more manageable. Or it may be helpful to suggest a process of presenting the item with background information and clarification, breaking into small groups for idea sharing and making priorities, and then returning to the main group for discussion.
    - Finish with something short and easy to provide a sense of hope for next time.
4. Announcements.
5. Next steps/summary of decisions: Review who will do what by when; this will help people remember their commitments and will be sure these get into the minutes to help guide the next meeting's agenda.
6. Evaluation and closing: provide a quick opportunity for people to think through what happened and to express their feelings about the proceedings and thus to provide a sense of closure to the experience; and to learn to have better meetings in the future.

Estimate the time needed for each item and put it on the agenda chart. This will:

- Indicate to participants the relative weights of the items;
- Help participants tailor their participation to the time available; and
- Give a sense of the progress of the meeting.

Facilitating a Meeting

The tone of the meeting is usually set in the beginning. It's important to start on a note of confidence and energy and with the recognition that those present are people, not just roles and functions. Sometimes a quick sharing of good things that have happened to individual people lately will do this. The time it takes is repaid by the contribution it makes to a relaxed and upbeat atmosphere where participants are encouraged to be real with each other.

Agenda Review:

1. Go through the whole agenda in headline form, giving a brief idea of what is to be covered and how.

2. Briefly explain the rationale behind the order of the proposed agenda.
3. Then, and not before, ask for questions, comments, and additions to the agenda.
4. Don't be defensive on the agenda you have proposed, but don't change everything at the suggestion of one person--check it out with the group first.
5. If major additions are proposed, make the group aware that adjustments must be made because of limited time available, like taking something out, postponing something until later, etc.
6. If an item that some people do not want to deal with is suggested for discussion, consider that there is no consensus and it cannot be included at that time.
7. Remember that your responsibility as facilitator is to the whole group and not to each individual.
8. When the agenda has been amended, ask the participants if they are willing to accept it, and insist on a response. They need to be aware of having made a contract with you about how to proceed. Besides, it is their meeting!

Agenda Items Proper:

1. Arrange (before the meeting) to have somebody else present each item.
2. Encourage the expression of various viewpoints. The more important the decision, the more important it is to have all pertinent information (facts, feelings and opinions) on the table.
3. Expect differences of opinion; when handled well, they can contribute greatly to creative solutions.
4. Be suspicious of agreements reached too easily. Test to make sure that people really do agree on essential points.
5. Don't let discussion continue between two people, but ask for comments by others. After all, it is the group that needs to make the decisions and carry them out.
6. As much as possible, hold people to speaking for themselves only and to being specific when they refer to others. Not: "some people say . . . ," "we all know . . . ," "they would not listen . . . ." Even though this is scary in the beginning, it will foster building of trust in the long run.
7. Keep looking for minor points of agreement and state them. It helps morale.
8. Encourage people to think of fresh solutions as well as to look for possible compromises.
9. In tense situations or when solutions are hard to reach, remember humor, affirmation, quick games for energy, change of places, silence, etc.
10. When you test for consensus, state in question form everything that you feel participants agree on. Be specific: "Do we agree that we'll meet on Tuesday evenings for the next two months and that a facilitator will be found at each meeting to function for the next one?" Do NOT merely refer to a previous statement: "Do you all agree that we should do it the way it was just suggested?"
11. Insist on a response. Here again the participants need to be conscious of making a contract with each other.
12. If you find yourself drawn into the discussion in support of a particular position, it would be preferable to step aside as facilitator until the next agenda item. This can be arranged beforehand if you anticipate a conflict of interest.
13. Almost any meeting will benefit from quick breaks in the proceedings-- energy injections--provided by short games, songs, a common stretch, etc.

Evaluation

In small meetings, it is often wise to evaluate how things went (the meeting process, that is, not the content). A simple format: on top of a large sheet of newsprint or a blackboard put a + on the left side, a - in the middle, and a / on the right side. Under the + list positive comments, things that people felt good about. Under the - list the things that could have been done better, that did not come off so well. Under / list specific suggestions for how things could have been improved.

Don't get into arguments about whether something was in fact helpful or not; people have a right to their feelings. It is not necessary to work out consensus on what was good and what was not about the meeting. Meetings almost invariably get better after people get used to evaluating how they function together. A few minutes is usually all that is needed for evaluation; don't drag it out. Try to end with a positive comment.

Closing
Try to end the meeting in the same way it started--with a sense of gathering.

Drawn from: "Meeting Facilitation --The No-Magic Method"by Berit Lakey *http://www.reclaiming.org/resources/consensus/blakey.html and the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center*

Tips for Meeting Facilitators

What is a Facilitator? The facilitator is the person in charge of the meeting. They move the meeting along.

The Facilitator is Responsible for:

• Getting agreement on agenda and processes before and during the meeting
• Conducting the meeting - makes sure the group keeps to ground rules, time limits, etc.
• Guiding discussion
• Staying neutral, asking questions and suggesting ways to approach parts of the agenda
• Making sure the group comes to decisions and work is divided among members
• Keeping the group on track when they head off onto tangents
• Watching the vibe of the meeting and helping to keep energy up
• Making sure everyone participates and no one dominates
• Creating a safe and positive environment (protects people from personal attack)
• Intervening if problems come up, dealing with concerns
• Creating a comfortable environment - using language that makes everyone comfortable

Strategies for Good Facilitation (see below for specific things you can say during a meeting):
• Ask person who put specific item on agenda to give a brief introduction on important background information and what they want done;
• Give 5 minute warnings when moving on to another agenda item. Appoint a separate timekeeper if necessary.;
• Put off off-subject topics - Create a list (a “parking lot”) for items to be discussed at another time;
• Paraphrase (repeat back in your own words) to check for the sense of the discussion;
• Help people avoid repeating themselves by summarizing discussion and asking only for comments in areas that haven’t been mentioned;
• Make suggestions for how to move forward - after discussion has gone on for a while, try to summarize, look for agreement or sticking points, and come to decision;
• Ask questions;
• Be positive and encourage full participation - make sure everyone gets to speak, try to notice when someone is holding back;
• Focus on issues, not personalities;
• Ask someone else to facilitate if you want to actively participate in the discussion;
• Check briefly for agreement before moving on - make sure everyone understands decisions
Techniques for making decisions in meetings:
• Brainstorming
• Prioritizing (ranking items)
• Pro’s and Con’s
• Straw voting (informal poll to see where people are)
• Going around to everyone to check for the sense of the group

Suggested Wording for Facilitating a Meeting

1. Make sure each agenda item is introduced by the person responsible for it. This way everyone understands why the item is being discussed. The introduction should include: information that everyone needs to know, what needs to be decided, and possible pro’s and con’s.
“Jane, could you please give us a little background on this issue and tell us what action you are requesting?”

2. Make sure everyone has a chance to speak.
“I’ve noticed a few people have been saying a lot on this issue; before hearing any more from them, is there anyone who hasn’t spoken yet who has something to add?”

3. Encourage everyone to say what’s on their mind. Try to notice when people are holding back; that could make it hard for them to come to a decision later.
“I sense some hesitancy from folks to speak openly on this issue; it’s important we hear all points of view, so I encourage everyone to be honest about their feelings.”

4. Make sure people speak only on the matter at hand. If other issues come up, keep track of them on a "parallel agenda" and let people know that the group will return to this agenda before the end of the meeting.
“Joe, you’re raising some good points and I’ve noted them here; we’ll come back to them before the end of the meeting, but let’s focus more directly on the issue at hand.”

5. Encourage people to avoid repeating themselves and others by summarizing discussion periodically.
‘So far, I’ve heard the following objections raised…The arguments in favor of the proposal seem to be…I’ve heard people propose the following possible solutions…”

6. Keep the meeting moving along. Remind people of time and appoint a timekeeper if necessary. If designated time runs out, ask the group to agree to spend more time on the issue, postpone it until later in the meeting, or put the discussion off until another meeting.
“We’re about to run out of the designated time on this issue. Is there agreement to spend another ten minutes to get a few more ideas on the table and make a decision now, or should we postpone a final decision until our next meeting?”

7. Encourage the group to take a break to restore energy or ease tension.
“I’m seeing a few people ‘resting their eyes.’ Would anybody object to a five minute break to get up and stretch and get some fresh air?”

8. After a topic has been discussed for a while, start trying to move the group toward agreement by summarizing discussion points, looking for common points of agreement, identifying sources of conflict, etc.
“I’m hearing most people agree with…but there seems to be a few points of view on…Perhaps we could focus on how to agree on these last few issues.”

9. Know when the group has reached a decision. Also know when a group cannot reach a decision; suggest postponing a decision when…
a) the group needs critical information
b) the group needs to hear from others
c) the group is not prepared
“I’d like to propose we postpone this discussion because…”

10. Make sure everyone understands the decision.
Could we briefly summarize the proposal that’s being decided right now?

11. If you want to participate actively in the discussion, ask someone else to take over facilitating the meeting. If you have a quick personal comment, signal to the group that this comment comes from you personally.
“I’m recognizing myself as speaker.” (Stand up or take some other physical action to distinguish you are not speaking as facilitator.)

Drawn from: CompassPoint Non-Profit Services,the Gay-Straight Alliance Network, a project of The Tides Center. http://www.gsanetwork.org/resources/facilitate.html and from the North American Students of Cooperation Cooperative Education and Training Institute

Sample Agenda Chart for Meeting Facilitation

Feel free to borrow this format for writing up an agenda chart. It's a good idea to post the agenda where everyone can see it, on a piece of butcher paper or on a blackboard. You can also give copies of the agenda to each person at the meeting.

Meeting Date: Meeting Objective(s):

Meeting Roles:

1. Facilitator: ________________________ 2. Recorder: ________________________
3. Timekeeper: ____________________

Agenda	Purpose/Activity	Time	Responsibility	Notes
1. Introductions/ check-in	Tone-setting	5 min.	Facilitator	
2. Review meeting objective(s), agenda	Note meeting goal, ending time, special business, ask for new items, prioritize agenda to fit time frame	5 min.	Facilitator	
3. Confirm/assign meeting roles	Make sure above roles are assigned and clear	2 min.	Facilitator	
4. Work agenda items	Reports from committees and working groups, old and new business, special reports, etc.		Committee or working group spokespeople	
5. Plan next steps	Review decisions and commitments made, items for next meetings' agenda			
6. Evaluation	How do participants feel about the meeting? What went well? What could be improved?	5 min.	Facilitator	
7. Closing	End on a positive, momentum-building tone	5 min.		

From Californians for GE-Free Agriculture

Four Lessons on Volunteer Coordination

Grassroots organizations are built on the work and dedication of volunteers. Most of the local genetic engineering action groups in this country are volunteer-driven. While biotech companies have incredible financial resources, our strength is in our numbers. Volunteer coordination is not only a key component of keeping a grassroots group going, it is also the cornerstone of making lasting change on this issue.

This section has four key lessons on volunteer coordination: working with volunteers, recruiting volunteers, supporting volunteers, and preventing volunteer burnout.

It's especially important for group volunteer coordinators to be familiar with resources like this one, but all the core members of grassroots groups should recognize ways to bring new volunteers into this movement and to keep them involved over time.

Lesson 1: Working with Volunteers

1. Make sure you have a campaign plan

Having a plan in place for your group's work is vital to successfully engaging volunteers. Staying focused on clear strategies and campaigns that are moving your group towards its long-term goals will enable you to generate the support you need and focus volunteer efforts. Without a campaign plan, volunteers' time and energy could be wasted, and their interest will wane without an end goal in sight; with a campaign plan, it will be clear what you need help with, and volunteers' jobs will be defined and productive.

It's best to have your campaign plans in place before you begin focusing on volunteer recruitment. Having your campaign plan in writing makes it easy to review the goals and objectives when meeting with new volunteers and ensures that you have the information you'll need to include in fundraising proposals and promotional information. *(For more on establishing campaign plans, please see "Develop a Campaign Plan" chapter of the toolkit.)*

2. Set up your system for working with volunteers

Knowing what you currently have in place, or need to put in place to effectively manage volunteers, pays off. Consider the following when planning your system for working with volunteers.

Who will be responsible for volunteer management?

Often, when people are planning their project, they identify individuals responsible for the event coordination, fundraising, etc. But the core and essential task of coordinating and motivating these and other volunteers goes unrecognized and unfulfilled. Having at least one person focused on managing your group's volunteers is not a luxury but rather a necessity. The volunteer coordinator is one of the first positions that should be filled to help build momentum and ultimately sustain volunteer interest.

Do you have a contact person?

It's important to have at least one person whose name, phone number and/or email can be given out as a point person for developing your initial project team, recruiting volunteers, creating partnerships, fundraising, etc. This may be the person responsible for volunteer management or another committee or staff member supporting the project.

How will you keep track of volunteer information?

Whether it's a paper trail, a series of Excel spreadsheets, or a data base, record keeping is critical to your success. Consider all of the information that is necessary for following up with individuals who show an interest in volunteering: name, address, phone number(s), areas of interest, skills to offer, hours of availability, emergency contacts, etc. Also, be sure to keep careful notes of who has volunteered and what projects they worked on, so you can remember what they are interested in and always thank them for the work they've done. The more organized and accessible your volunteer information is, the easier it is for the group to share the tasks involved in managing volunteers and delegate appropriate tasks.

Having ready-made forms for volunteers to fill out can be a helpful way of record keeping. Make use of event registration and regular sign-in forms, logs to track volunteer hours and volunteer information forms to collect information about volunteer interests and experience. You can also use petitions as a way to collect volunteer names; you can either let petition signers know that they will be called for volunteer opportunities, or include a check box on the petition for signers who would like to get more involved. You can find a sample petition like this in the "Resources" section.

3. Determining and communicating needs

Before you get going, consider your needs and expectations, what volunteers can expect if they get involved: Think about how you will communicate these and other aspects of the project.

Be prepared to communicate...

The project

Prepare a simple information package on your organization or campaign that provides background on the campaign and includes some information about the group that is leading it. You'll want to have this information on hand at tabling and media events. This information will also be useful when you are doing training sessions with new volunteers and fundraising for your project.

How others can get involved

Recruitment flyers, newsletters and notices to community members are helpful tools that communicate how people can join the project. Word of mouth is typically the most effective vehicle for encouraging people to get involved so don't be shy about spreading the word - it will spread. And the better organized you are for responding to volunteer inquiries, the more likely people will stick around.

Your expectations

What is expected of your volunteers? Think about the specific skills you're looking for, how much time is required and when. Knowing this will help you give your volunteers clear directions. Short job descriptions are very useful for communicating expectations for specific volunteer roles. The clearer you are, the more productive and committed your volunteers will be.

The benefits of participating

Consider why volunteers would want to become involved. Simply put, what do they gain from their involvement? New skills, friendships, a stronger sense of community, a real contribution to the environment - these are some of the rewards of volunteering.

Be sure to emphasize the benefits of volunteering and of the project in your recruitment flyers, letters to members and supporters, through the media, etc. People are attracted to a positive message - appeal to this sense.

Your appreciation

Communicating your appreciation through regular feedback, recognition and personal thanks is crucial. You can’t thank volunteers too often. An open honest environment between organizers and volunteers is a must to ensure a rewarding experience for all. Consider organizing volunteer appreciation days once or twice a year—gather food donations from local restaurants, have a picnic in a beautiful spot, and review all the progress your group has made with the help of your volunteers.

Lesson 2: Recruiting Volunteers

Engaging enough volunteers to share all the work that needs to be done is a common challenge and often the same few people are doing the bulk of the work.

Sometimes, even when there are people knocking on the door to participate, groups struggle with finding work to fit volunteer needs and interests. At the same time, they push on without the volunteer support they need in other project areas. Having a recruitment plan in place means not waiting for volunteers to walk in the door and offer to help, but rather going out and actively seeking volunteer help for areas of the project that require support.

Knowing how to reach and engage the right volunteers is important for establishing a consistent volunteer team and will help you meet the needs of your project during its various stages. Following the steps outlined in this chapter will help you recruit the right volunteers for your project.

1. Before you begin to recruit

Know what you need your volunteers to do.

Consider your organization and project carefully to determine what skills you require of your volunteers, and when. Your recruitment techniques will be very different if you are looking for a large group of people to come to a rally than if you need one person to help write funding applications. Think about the skills and roles your project requires rather than what volunteers can offer your project. While you'll need to be flexible to match skills and interests, try not to tailor tasks to fit the specific skills of volunteers - in the long run, this could set you off strategy and consume valuable time.

Develop job descriptions for your volunteer positions. This will make it clear what you expect your volunteers to do, whether you are looking for special skills and experience, and how much time you require of your volunteers. Having job descriptions will also mean you'll be able to give volunteers work to do as soon as you've identified that there is a match between their skills and your project's needs.

If someone offers to volunteer for your organization or project, they most likely want to get involved in a project right away. The longer you take to get back to them, the more likely they are to lose interest and perhaps volunteer elsewhere. There are many volunteer management resources to help you develop volunteer job descriptions.

Design volunteer positions for varying levels of responsibility, commitment and experience.

There are many different levels of involvement for people looking to volunteer with grassroots groups. Someone could come to a rally, they could help organize a press conference, or they could be the point person on fundraising or on a particular campaign.

Design a greater number of jobs requiring short, concentrated effort with a definite end point, a smaller number of positions with more involved, coordinating responsibilities and much fewer positions with ongoing but less time-consuming responsibilities. You will likely need to recruit differently for the various types of roles. The recruitment techniques discussed in this chapter, which are appropriate for recruiting coordinators and project volunteers, may not work for recruiting board or committee members.

If you have volunteer positions that require considerable commitment or seem too large or difficult, consider recruiting an entire group as a volunteer unit or several people to job share. For example, coordinating a fundraising plan is a long-term commitment, but organizing a house party or a raffle as part of that plan is less time-intensive. If recruiting for a big job is not turning up results, separate the work into smaller roles and recruit for those.

Be flexible with the positions that require greater responsibility and levels of expertise. Some volunteers will be reluctant to take on these roles so you may find that you need to recruit for these positions in stages. For instance, if your volunteers are interested in advertising and promotion but apprehensive to take the lead role, build their confidence by recruiting them to design flyers and write media releases. When they have mastered these tasks, mentor them in the more difficult task of coordinating media strategies and serving as media contacts.

2. Identify your target groups

Once you know the types of volunteer roles that need to be filled, you'll need to find the volunteers that have the necessary skills, experience and interest. It is helpful to identify groups of people that share a common characteristic, association or experience to target with your recruitment efforts. Identifying target groups for recruitment will help you tailor your efforts to the specific volunteer roles you're trying to fill. It's best not to rely heavily on only one target group when recruiting- branch out and try to involve volunteers from many different target groups.

3. Target your recruitment by:

Activity

When you need volunteers with special skills or experience, target your recruitment by the specific activity. Identify where you would typically find people with the skill sets you are looking for to accomplish that activity. Don't be afraid to invite people to participate even if you don't know them.

You can also tap into existing community volunteer resource bases, like a local volunteer center, schools and universities, social service agencies and other organizations that work on environmental issues, food issues, and agriculture to find people who may be interested in working with your group or on a particular campaign.

Availability

Many times there are no special skills required of your volunteers, just a willing attitude to help. Consider who would be available during the times you need help. Consider targeting seniors, retirees, stay at home parents and university students with flexible hours for volunteer needs during work hours.

Association

Your project and the participants are the best promotion and recruitment tools around. Ask current participants to attend a 'bring-a-friend' event and recruit from the new faces. Having a connection with the project is a great reason to get and stay involved.

> More than 50% of people who volunteer do so because they are asked to by a friend, co-worker or acquaintance. McClintock. *Quick tips for Volunteer Management*

Volunteer-focused programming

Groups that value and encourage their participants to volunteer as a way of earning badges or other accomplishments, can be a great target for volunteer recruitment. Many high school students are now required to complete a certain amount of community service in order to graduate. Local scouts, brownies and girl guide groups as well as non-profit youth-oriented groups can be of great help when many hands are needed. Many businesses support the volunteering efforts of their employees by allowing them time off or letting them modify their work schedule to make time to volunteer. Your local volunteer center is a good way to connect with businesses interested in supporting and promoting volunteerism among their employees.

4. Communicating with your target

Develop a recruitment message

Your recruitment message communicates what your group can offer potential volunteers while appealing to their motivation to get involved with your project. Communicate what the volunteer will do, the skills and attributes that are necessary for the position, and the time commitment required. The recruitment message should also clearly describe how the work will benefit community members and other key stakeholders, as well as how the position will meet volunteer needs and interests.

Speak with potential volunteers face-to-face

Nothing beats face-to-face contact when you're describing the value of the work being accomplished and inviting someone to participate. For instance, if someone signs up to volunteer at a tabling event and you have a good short conversation with them, give them a call and set up a time to talk with them about the issue and the group over coffee.

Network, network, network

The members of your group already have connections to many people in your community. Friends and neighbors could help with projects, could donate time or money to your campaigns, and could have connections with elected officials who could influence the issue.

It is also important to think about ways to continually bring new people into the movement and into your group:

- Think about any contacts you may have and look at them as paths to reach a greater audience.
- Attend meetings where you can reach a variety of individuals with different interests. Always have information on hand so you are able to give people details they can walk away with and share with others.
- Participate in community events and bring a display along to fairs, trade shows and other events. Increasing the exposure of your organization and project will give you a greater audience from which to recruit.

Using motivation to design recruitment materials

Appealing to the motivations of volunteers is a great way to get them involved. In order to meet volunteer needs, you first need to understand why people volunteer. Are they concerned about food safety? About the environment? About the well-being of local farmers? Once you have pinpointed the concerns of your members, you can design campaigns that best fit the interests of the group.

Make full use of advertising and publicity

Develop brochures, flyers, and other materials to help recruit and retain volunteers:

- Your recruitment materials should be simple and succinctly address the what, where, why, who and how of the project. Offer added incentives such as the chance to receive training and learn new skills. Don't forget to include all relevant contact information.
- If possible, design a simple logo or add a design element to your existing logo that will identify your project. Participants appreciate being associated with something that is recognized by the community. The logo can be used for communication, advertising, volunteer awards or to display at a project event on a banner. Avoid issues of copyright violation by ensuring that you have permission to use any existing logos.

- Make full use of any free publicity, such as public service announcements, human-interest news articles and event listings.
- Contact traditional media outlets such as radio, television, newspapers and special interest publications.
- Sprinkle the billboards in your community liberally with posters, flyers and brochures. Think about where you can reach your target groups and consider restaurants, supermarket boards, libraries and local coffee shops that are heavily frequented.
- The Internet is an effective and inexpensive option for communicating and getting the word out about your project and volunteer opportunities. Find out if there are existing volunteer listserves in your community, or ask a group that works on similar issues to send out a call for volunteers to their lists.

5. When volunteers step in the door

Interview your candidates

Besides getting to know a potential volunteer, the interview process is especially important if you are looking for special skills and experience. An interview can be as simple as a short chat to discuss your mutual expectations, to learn if they have the right skills and experience, and to discuss the time commitment and goals of the arrangement.

Provide an orientation session

An orientation session is a great way of welcoming your volunteers, providing basic information and helping them understand how your project works. Most importantly, an orientation session demonstrates to your volunteers that you respect them and their contribution. Introduce new volunteers to other volunteers and staff. Spend time finding out what makes them concerned about genetic engineering, and tell them about the group’s history and current projects. Talk together to figure out which projects or activities sound the most exciting to the volunteer, and make a follow-up plan.

Train your volunteers

Training is one of the most valued forms of volunteer recognition. Training can also be promoted through your recruitment strategy as an added benefit of participation. Training is essential if you want your volunteers to have the information and know-how to successfully complete their tasks. Gather volunteers together, clarify technique, and provide instructions so that no one wastes their time. Training is an opportunity for volunteers to meet each other, learn new skills or brush up on skills that have been unused. You can do workshops on tabling, working with the media, meeting with elected officials, and organizing events (like fundraisers or rallies). If no one in your group has these skills, contact GEAN to find out if there are other activists in your area who could lead group trainings.

Lesson 3: Supporting your Volunteers

Active and committed volunteers are the key to success in any community organizing project. Experienced volunteers are especially valuable because they already 'know the ropes'. They are familiar with the goals of your project, and can provide inspiration and leadership to new volunteers. With volunteers juggling their many priorities and demands on their time, it can be a challenge to keep a steady pool of individuals to help throughout the stages of your project.

So what can you do to keep your volunteers inspired and involved? Here are some ideas for retaining and supporting the heart of your project - your volunteers.

1. Keep volunteers coming back

Volunteers get involved for many different reasons and they have a variety of needs with respect to their volunteer experience. Your volunteers will have an enriching work experience and your project will be more successful if you <u>meet the needs of your volunteers</u>. In order to this, here are some insights:

The impact of their contributions

Volunteers need to know that their contribution is making a difference, and every success along the way needs to be celebrated. Set clear short-, medium-, and long-term goals so that there are many opportunities for group members to feel the growing momentum of your local movement.

For example, set a target number of petition signatures to collect, and once that goal is met, have a party with all the volunteers who helped gather those names. Or set out to meet with a certain number of your city council members to educate them about this issue, and stay in touch with any volunteers who met with those elected officials as they agree to champion or supporter your bills and resolutions. You can also collect quotes from supportive elected officials and other influential community members who have been influenced by your volunteers about their support for the issue, and send those quotes out in volunteer listserves or newsletters to show the growing support for the movement.

Photos are also a powerful way to make sure volunteers feel recognized in their contribution to the group. Take pictures of volunteers tabling or collecting petition signatures at public events, or meeting with elected officials or giving presentations to students or other organizations. Make a collage in your meeting room or office, or post them on your website. This will help volunteers feel more a part of the group, and can attract new volunteers by showing how much fun you're having!

Community connection

Foster opportunities for volunteers to meet one another and work collaboratively. Set up small groups to table or petition together. Bring together diverse community members to meet with elected officials. Form teams to organize events. Instead of asking volunteers to write letters to the editor on their own, set up pot-luck letter writing parties at someone's house. Creating new friendships and connections in our communities is an important piece of organizing, and a great joy of working with a community group.

Feeling valued and respected

Providing a forum for volunteers' ideas to be heard communicates that their experience and knowledge is valued, keeps volunteers feeling connected and empowered and can contribute to achieving a more successful, realistic project. Where appropriate, ask a volunteer for their opinion and act on it. Check in with new volunteers after group meetings to see how they felt the meeting went and to find out if they have any questions. Oftentimes, experienced group members will use jargon or refer to group history or issues about genetic engineering that people new to the movement won’t understand. Answering new members’ questions and helping them feel heard is an important component in volunteer retention.

Choosing their role

Involving volunteers in deciding the role they will play empowers them to find a position that suits their interest, expectations and schedule. You may want to meet with your volunteers at the beginning of the project with a detailed list of all the tasks that need to be done. Everyone can then set priorities and decide which task they would like to do.

Make volunteer jobs interesting. Give volunteers a great place to work, new experiences and try to keep the atmosphere inviting and inspiring for all. Remember, the volunteer experience needs to be rewarding for them - and for your project or organization.

Be flexible with your expectations

Being clear about your expectations right from the start is important, but expectations also need to be flexible. Recognize that a volunteer's needs and motivations change over time. Encourage volunteers to communicate with you about their volunteer experience and check-in often with your volunteers to discuss why they are volunteering and if they are happy with their work. If they are dissatisfied, do something about it!

If the work doesn't meet your expectations or those of your volunteer, work together to find an activity that will meet both your needs. You may want to evaluate progress together periodically to discuss and plan for the tasks that lie ahead.

Lesson 4: Preventing Volunteer Burnout

It is normal to lose volunteers as they move to new places or on to new interests. However, if your project is losing key volunteers after they've contributed a great deal of time and effort or volunteers are moving through your project as if they were moving through a revolving door, you may be creating a 'burnout' situation. If you do find that your volunteers are experiencing burnout, you're not alone. Volunteer burnout is a significant issue that many grassroots groups face.

Recognizing Burnout

Do your volunteers suffer from a persistent lack of energy and satisfaction? Are they short on enthusiasm and motivation? Is their interest flagging? Other symptoms of burnout include lack of concentration and humour, and decreased self-confidence. If you recognize these symptoms in yourself or in your volunteers, you could be suffering from burnout.

1. Tips to Prevent Volunteer Burnout

The following tips should help you ensure that your volunteers remain motivated and committed to your greening project.

Ensure that goals are realistic, relevant and achievable

Be realistic when you set goals and objectives. There is no quicker way of burning out volunteers than making them reach for an impossible target. It is a good idea to gather input from volunteers, perhaps through a survey, to provide a forum for suggestions and concerns to be communicated and dealt with as early as possible.

Members of the group should periodically revisit the vision, mandate and campaign plans. Doing this regularly (i.e. when a new volunteer board member joins) will keep your eyes on your goals and ensure they are relevant to the interests and skills of participants.

Keep the workload manageable

Typically, there is too much work to be done by too few people, and often a small group of volunteers work too many hours trying to get everything done.

- Revisit your project plan, expand timelines and re-evaluate the project size when necessary.
- Don't overwork volunteers! More hands make light work so recruit more volunteers to spread the work around if the workload is too great for your volunteer team
- Do not let one person take on too much. Teach volunteers in leadership roles how to delegate.
- Lead by example. Make sure that you aren't doing more than you're able, that you have realistic expectations of yourself and that you are getting joy from your involvement in the group.

Give volunteers the opportunity to say no and take breaks from the project

It is much better to have a volunteer temporarily step away or take a lesser role than to lose them altogether. Invite a hard working volunteer to take a break to do something else or rest from their role with the project. They may appreciate the opportunity to have a change and return to the project more energized and inspired.

Take Time Off

Have the flexibility in your project plan to slow things down and put things on hold. Stagger 'big' project with smaller goals. If you are feeling exhausted, or if you recognize that one of your volunteers is, encourage them to take some time off or find other members of the group who can step in and fill your roles for a time.

Do you know someone suffering from burnout?

First Aid for Burnout Victims (Woloshuk and Eagan, *Beating Burnout*)

Do Less

- Work fewer hours
- Make a list of your priorities and do the most important first
- Say 'no' and don't feel guilty about it

Delegate

- Other people may not do it exactly like you, but trust them to do a good job

Exercise

- Take a break, even if the day is busy

Get away from it all

- A vacation or weekend retreat can be really refreshing

Spend more time with family and friends
Take time for yourself
Rest
Have fun and laugh about it

Promote a sense of accomplishment

- Ask volunteers to participate in setting priorities so the most important tasks get accomplished first. This will help give volunteers a sense of accomplishment, even if only a small portion of the overall project is completed.
- Emphasize what has been accomplished over what still needs to be done.
- If a volunteer is best at doing public outreach and has been doing a lot of data entry lately, encourage them to focus on a project that gets them out in the community again. Perhaps the data work can be done at a later time, or another group member would be willing to do it.

Manage volunteer time efficiently

Everyone has full, busy lives. Be sure you use your volunteers' time effectively:

- Be prepared so that you don't waste people's time. For example, if you have a team of people ready to table, make sure all the necessary hand-outs and sign-up sheets are copied, organized, and ready. Have pens and clipboards available, and make sure there are enough materials for everyone.
- Ensure that volunteers know exactly what is expected of them so they don't waste their time doing something that doesn't contribute to the end product.
- Tailor your volunteer jobs so that they can be readily started and accomplished in time allotments of one, two or three hours maximum. Most volunteers contribute less than five hours a week.
- Scheduling in advance allows volunteers to manage their time commitment.
- Build in extra time for training, questions and clean up at the end of events.

Make the volunteer work fun

It's easy enough at times to feel overwhelmed with the challenges and workload associated with genetic engineering campaigns, but try not to let this stress affect the quality of the volunteer experience. Volunteers are more apt to keep coming back if they enjoy what they're doing and whom they're doing it with.

- Provide opportunities for volunteers to switch to different tasks that they find more enjoyable.
- Create a social network. Meet for coffee, potlucks and picnics. Celebrate volunteer birthdays. Build 'chat-time' into your volunteer activities and meetings.
- Think about starting a project scrapbook to record the history of your project, comments, photographs of volunteers and events for each year. This can become a cherished memento for the project or organization and a source of pride for volunteers.

This is a slightly modified version of a guide, "Hands for Nature: A Volunteer Handbook," that was put together by a Canadian group called Evergreen that does urban gardening projects. (www.evergreen.ca)

Communication Tools

There are many tools your group can use to enhance communications. This section will give guidance on using three tools: conference calls, listservs, and websites. These tools can be used for internal and external communications.

In many groups, communication can be referred to as “internal communication” or “external communication.” It’s helpful to understand these two categories, especially in the formation stages of a local group. Internal communication is shared with your core supporters to meet your groups’ needs such as sensitive strategy information, organizational structure development, and meeting minutes. Most internal communication should be internal because you don’t want your opposition to know these things, and other internal communication will just be plain boring or inappropriate for the general public to know. External communication is communicated in a way that the general public will understand it and also be persuaded by it. When external communication is effective, people eventually cross over to become the core supporters who could then also participate in internal communication.
(See Chapter 3: Get Media Coverage, Section “Develop a Message)

How to set up free conference calls
Sometimes you need to talk with a number of people at once, but a face-to-face meeting isn’t an option. Perhaps there are a number of groups in your state that want to work together on an rBGH-free dairies campaign, or want to collaborate on GM-free school meals campaigns. You can get everyone together on the phone by setting up a conference call, in which all the parties dial in to the same number and can speak together as a group on the phone.

The service www.freeconference.com is a free, easy-to-use service that allows you to set up a conference call with as many people as you need. So long as participants don’t mind paying long distance fees, the calls are free; you are assigned a random number for everyone to dial into and then you create a code for callers to use. If you want to make your call toll-free, the organizer of the call has to pay a nominal fee for each minute of time used. There are also options to record your conference call for a small fee, which may help if you want to review the content of the call later. It only takes a minute to set up your free account, and only a minute more to set up a call.

How to set up a listserv
Listserv are email mailing lists that make it easy to stay in touch with supporters and other members of your group. You can use listserv to send out regular newsletters to your friends and supporters, to connect working groups with one another (if you have a sub-section of your group that is working on a particular campaign, for instance), and for a host of other needs.

A few companies provide free listserv services. Riseup, a company that focuses on supporting progressive organizing efforts, allows you to set up listservs, www.riseup.net, as does Yahoogroups, www.yahoogroups.com. It isn’t hard to establish a listserv, and you can determine if the list is open (anyone can join) or moderated (so only certain people have access to the list), and many other particulars.

How to set up a website
More and more people in this country and abroad turn to the internet for their information. In general, a website is used for external communication. A website is a powerful way to spread the

word about your group and about the issue of genetic engineering to your community and abroad.

It can feel intimidating to set up a webpage if you've never done it before, but there are a number of ways to go about this that are accessible and not too time consuming.

One way is to find a web designer in your community who is willing to put in some time to set up your page. Ask other progressive groups in your community with web pages who designed their page. Oftentimes, you can find people who will donate their time for your group, or who will give you a reduced rate on their usual fees. Just ask! You would then need to have a sense of how you want your page to look and what information you want to have available, and then can sit down with your designer and put the page together.

Other components needed to set up a page include paying a company to provide web hosting for your site (reserving space on the web for your page) and buying your URL, the address that people type into their web browser to get to your page. These do not need to be too expensive or too much of a drain on your resources. Please contact GEAN for further advice about how to set up a web page, info@geaction.org.

If you want to make it possible for people to donate from your webpage, check out www.paypal.com. PayPal has a program that can allow supporters to do one-click donations through your webpage.

If you don't have the people or resources to update your page often, but want to have action alerts and breaking news on your page, you can link to other groups that update their pages regularly. Two good ones for national news stories and action alerts are the Organic Consumers Association, www.organicconsumers.org, and the Center for Food Safety, www.centerforfoodsafety.org. Say No to GMOs! has a great page with lots of information articles, action alerts, and news stories cataloged for the past few years, www.saynotogmos.org.

Examples of grassroots and regional genetic engineering action group web pages that you can look to for advice or inspiration include:

GE-Free Maine: www.gefreemaine.org
Californians for GE-Free Agriculture: www.calgefree.org
GMO-Free Hawaii: www.gmofreehawaii.org
Rural Vermont: www.ruralvermont.org

Most GEAN affiliates have web pages, and any one of them may give you some useful ideas; check out the links to the pages from http://www.geaction.org/network.html

Consensus Decision Making Process

Used by the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center~~1999

The OAEC staff collective will in all cases, unless specifically stated otherwise by consensus agreement, make decisions based on "consensus" as defined in this document.

I. Defining Consensus Process:

By "consensus," we mean that agreements on minor and major issues are reached through a process of gathering information and viewpoints, having discussions, and synthesizing proposals and/or developing new ones. The goal of consensus process is to reach decisions which everyone can agree on, or at least agree to live with. Ideally, consensus synthesizes the ideas of every member of the group into one decision.

Consensus does not necessarily mean total agreement. Rather, it means that a proposal has gone through a process in which everyone has had a chance to express feelings and concerns and in which no decision is finalized until everyone in the group feels comfortable with the decision and is able to implement it without resentment.

II. We have agreed to adhere to a consensus model of decision making for these reasons:

- Consensus creates and strengthens a spirit of trust, cooperation, and respect among the group's members.
- By incorporating the clearest thinking of all of the group's members, consensus increases the likelihood of new, better and more creative decisions.
- Because all have participated in its formation, everyone has a stake in implementing decisions.
- Consensus significantly lessons the possibility that a minority will feel that an unacceptable decision has been imposed on them.
- Consensus safeguards against ego/adversary attitudes, uninformed decision making, "rubber-stamping" of decisions, coercion, self interested positions, mistrust, and half-hearted agreements.

III. Consensus process requires from individual group members and the whole group:

- Mutual respect.
- Time, patience, and commitment to reaching mutually agreeable outcomes.
- The assumption that each person has ideas to offer and that the sum of the parts are greater than the whole.
- That ideas and solutions be listened to with respect, trust and without coercion.
- That there be sensitivity and openness to new and different ideas.
- That there be an honest effort on the part of all members to accommodate the feelings and ideas of others with one's own.
- A dedication to pursue a mutually agreeable outcome.
- A willingness to "step aside" in decisions with which one may not totally agree, but with which one can live.

- That each person will exercise his/her power to "block" responsibly, i.e. only in cases of profound disagreement with the rest of the group. If one does feel that strongly, it is vital for the good of the individual and the group as a whole to block consensus without feeling guilty, and for the group to respond to this without resentment or anger.
- An understanding that not everyone will have an "equal voice" under consensus. Individuals who have greater involvement in the matter under discussion will have more developed viewpoints and will usually have stronger concerns. At the same time, there must be a strong commitment to avoid patterns of domination and passivity.

IV. Guidelines for consensus process:

1. **An issue is raised**: This may be in the form of a concrete proposal, or as a general discussion. In the latter case, a go-around or brainstorm can be used for everyone to express their point of view, and these ideas can then be synthesized into a proposal. The working proposal should be clearly stated in simple, non-biased language by the facilitator.
2. **Clarifying questions and amendments**: The facilitator asks for clarifying questions, modifications and friendly amendments. These must be acceptable to the originator of the proposal to be considered as such, or they may be offered as a counter proposal. The proposal(s) are restated and clarifying questions are asked.
3. **Further facilitated discussion and debate:** At any point in this discussion, process suggestions may be offered on how to proceed. Such process suggestions take precedence over other speakers on the list. Dividing the proposal into several parts for discussion, breaking into smaller groups to allow for further discussion, forming a committee to rework a particularly difficult proposal outside of the meeting, or pointing out a mistake in procedure are all examples of process suggestions that can be helpful in overcoming difficulties. If discussion on an issue has gone on for a long time and seems to be getting nowhere, call for a break.
4. **Testing for consensus**: As general agreement emerges, the facilitator restates the original or evolved/amended proposal and tests for consensus. This is done first by asking for reservations and concerns to approving the proposal as stated. Even though a proposal may be acceptable to someone not in total agreement with it, it is important nonetheless for these reservations and concerns to be voiced. If the reservations or concerns rise to the level of objections (meaning that a person can't tolerate proposal as is), the proposal clearly needs more facilitated discussion and debate (#3).
5. **Resolving reservations and concerns—**amendments: If reservations or concerns are expressed, (ie: a person is concerned about proposal, thinks it may not be the best choice, wants small changes), the facilitator asks for amendments (small changes or rewording to meet reservations).
6. **Testing again for consensus**: Facilitator calls again for consensus (asks for objections or concerns to new, evolved proposal). If all agree, consensus is achieved. If all are in agreement except one or two people, there are three options:
    a. **Individual(s) can "stand aside":** If no successful accommodation is made to a person's objections after a reasonable group effort, it is in the individual's obligation to examine whether s/he feels strongly enough to maintain the objection. If not, s/he consents to "stand aside." If the individual(s) is/are willing to stand aside, it means they do not agree with the decision but do not feel strongly enough to "block." They are willing to have the decision go forward.
    b. **The group can set the proposal aside**: If more than two or three people start to stand aside, then the facilitator should question whether the best decision has been

reached yet. Perhaps the proposed decision should be set aside for another time or considered in a different light.

c. **Individual(s) can "block" the decision**: The majority should consider whether they truly understand the reasons and feelings of those dissenting and have exhausted all reasonable compromise. Individuals who are holding the group from making a decision should also examine themselves closely to assure that they are not withholding consensus out of self-interest, bias, stubbornness, vengeance, etc. That said, a person does have the option of "blocking" the decision. A block should be used cautiously and in a principled way, reflecting deeply felt convictions about the issue in question. A block is not just a "no" vote, or an expression of disfavor. A block says, "I believe what the group wants to do is wrong. I cannot allow the group to do it and I am willing to impose this view on other group members because I feel it so deeply."

7. **No decision is a decision**: If someone blocks a decision, the group has to start again. To not be able to make a decision *is a decision*. At this point, it is almost always best to table the item in question and to return to it another day, after those involved can reflect, and possibly talk about it outside the meeting.
8. **Consensus achieved**: If no one blocks a proposal, and it has been fully discussed, the group can consense to the proposal. When consensus is reached, decide how decision will be implemented.

VI. Roles and responsibilities at consensus based meetings:

Facilitator: helps move the meeting along. Takes suggestions for the agenda and arranges them in order of priority. Makes sure all other meeting roles are filled. Calls on people to speak in turn—keeps a written list if many are in line to speak. Helps insure that everyone has a chance to speak, and that no one dominates the discussion. Helps group resolve conflict and make decisions by summarizing, repeating, or re-phrasing proposals as necessary. Should remain neutral on topics being discussed; when an issue arises about which the facilitator feels strongly, and s/he wants to actively participate, someone else should take over the facilitation on that item.

Timekeeper: warns the group near the end of the time period allotted for an agenda item. May be filled by the facilitator.

Notetaker: records minutes, especially all proposals, amendments and decisions the group makes. Decisions and who is to implement them should be noted as precisely as possible.

Process-watcher: pays attention to group process, especially unexpressed feelings and tensions; reminds the group to relax and take breaks as needed. Optional/as needed.

(See www.geaction.org to download a pdf attachment to Chapter 1, Strategy Development Charts))