

ROGUE ACTION CENTER

Tools for Organizing: Working with Committees

Start with inspiration. Make sure committee members know why their work matters, what their role is, and how it relates to the overall work of the organization.

Recognize different personality types. An effective committee often is a good mix not only of different skills but of extroverts and introverts, task-oriented people and brainstormers, people who are cautious and others who are impatient, and so on. Work groups and assignments should take those characteristics into account.

Inoculate against potential problems in committee work *before* they happen when the discussion can be less personal. For example, the committee might discuss the likelihood that some committee members will feel they work harder than others. By discussing this ahead of time, the group can come up with solutions, such as giving each person or subcommittee very specific assignments. In contrast, if you wait until the problem comes up, you have the more emotional question of, “How can we deal with Person X not doing their share of the work?”

Another common problem to bring out is the resentment that committee members may feel toward people who are less active in the campaign. As pressure builds in an intense campaign, it is common for active members to turn on the very people they are trying to organize—“If only our members weren’t so apathetic (or so scared), we could win.” In the relatively calm atmosphere of the beginning of a campaign, committees can remind themselves that their job is not to complain about other people’s apathy or fear but to gradually do something about it by involving them in the campaign.

Provide a regular opportunity for people to ask questions, raise complaints, and express doubts. Otherwise, they may drift away and you won’t know why.

Pair up people who are of different backgrounds so committee members are aware of a wide range of concerns.

Keep up morale by regularly encouraging people to report on successes, no matter how small. Point out that progress must be measured not only by how far you have to go but by how far you have come.

Teach people how to get others to help them. Without training, committee members may try to do everything themselves, either because they think it is their job, it seems easier, or they don’t know how to ask for help. Eventually, however, they may feel overworked and stop doing much themselves.

Discuss assignments committee members have taken on and how other members of the organization could help with those tasks. If necessary, do simple roleplays so committee members can practice how to ask for help. Give committee members a chance to explain any problems they expect to have in getting help, and discuss how to overcome those problems.

Maintain a system for accountability and support.

- Start by spelling out each task clearly, including a target date for completion. Explain the task's relationship to the rest of the campaign. People are more likely to meet a deadline if they know that a next step in the campaign depends on completing their work by a certain date.
- Check with committee members to see how their work is going. Otherwise, you may not discover they need help until it is too late.
- Distribute minutes of meetings or a list of tasks and deadlines that were agreed to. That way each person knows what everyone else is supposed to be doing. One way to do this may be via e-mail to everyone on the committee.
- Have committee members give progress reports at committee meetings. This should be an opportunity to share ideas and to decide what to do if previous plans are not working out.
- When appropriate, have committee members work together on particular tasks. That especially helps committee members who may feel reluctant to take on a job because they're not sure if they have enough time or experience.
- Look for opportunities to help new committee members gain skills and confidence. It might take longer to involve a new person in planning an agenda for a meeting or writing a leaflet, but the investment of time will pay off as the organization develops another leader.
- If committee members are not doing what they've agreed to, do something about it before group morale is affected. If appropriate, offer help or get other committee members to talk to them privately. If necessary, give them new assignments that they are more likely to complete.
- **Make sure committee members are recognized for their collective work.** Their major reward will be a successful campaign. But their contribution as a group also can be recognized in publications, on the organization's web site, at meetings, or other means.