Group Structure
Neighborhood Leadership Institute Workshop

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About

**Group structure** involves the systems, roles, and processes that groups establish so they can operate effectively. A group’s ability to sustain itself is relative to the degree that its structure has been developed. Selecting a structure after careful thought and consideration sustains and supports the group’s work and the way its members interact.
WHAT IS STRUCTURE?

The organization of a society or group and the relations between its members that determine its working – how it makes decisions, how work is distributed, how new members join, etc.

The structure of a group has to be intentional and decided upon by core members.
WHY CHOOSE A STRUCTURE?

All groups have a structure even if they don’t intentionally choose one. Selecting a structure after careful thought and consideration will help support your group’s work. Choose one that fits your dynamics, beliefs, ideals, and realities.

The structure is not set in stone. Consider revising your structure if it is complicated, inefficient for your group, or if it does not facilitate open communication.
When selecting a structure for your group, be aware of the contexts in which your group works. Examples of contexts are:

- **Neighborhood**
  Where is your neighborhood located? What are the demographics of your community?

- **Resources**
  Do you have access to funding? Space? Materials?

- **Issues**
  Are you working on a community garden, an anti-violence campaign, or an arts program?
• Community
Who makes up your group – Youth? Elders? Racial make-up? How much time and experience is everyone bringing to the group?

• Institutions
Are there community centers, schools, churches, organizations, or other institutions in your community? What will be your relationship to them?

• Politicians
Do you have a relationship with your local elected officials? Are they allies? How will you interact with them?

• Commitment
How often does your group meet? How much time and energy does everyone have to commit? Can some commit more time than others?
Within each of these structures, there can be variations and changes based on each group’s needs. Find a structure that makes sense for your group!
1. Cooperatives and Collectives

A non-hierarchical structure that often uses consensus-based decision-making so that everyone is in full agreement about decisions.

This structure works well for small groups of people who can commit time for decision-making processes, meet often, and work together for longer periods of time.

Example
A community garden is comprised of 12 members who collectively come to a consensus about how to use the space. They meet every month, and everyone is able to give about the same amount of time to the garden. When conflicts arise, they take time during meetings to come up with solutions that work for all members.
Pros of Co-ops
Everyone in the group has a buy-in about decisions.

The group emphasizes relationships and members’ connections with each other.

Members feel their opinions are heard and considered.

Cons of Co-ops
Decisions take more time and energy.

Because members have a lot at stake in the group, sometimes discussions can get personal and emotional.
2. Member-Based Organizations

A group comprised of members who have a stake in the group, often pay dues, and have decision-making power. Members vote in leaders and decisions are made by democratic vote.

This structure works well for larger groups, groups that have a few members with more time to commit, and groups who may meet less often and/or have less time.

Example
A large block association of 100 members meets four times a year to plan regular events. Members elect leaders who are able to make decisions and act as point-people for the group. For major decisions about the group, they take a vote, relying on a simple majority (51%) to decide. For large projects, they create sub-committees.
Pros of Member-Based Orgs
Decision-making is efficient and quicker than consensus-based processes.

Cons of Member-Based Orgs
Some people may be unhappy with vote outcomes and decisions.

The group has clearly defined roles and responsibilities.

Members must make sure that leaders are speaking and acting in the group’s interests.
3. Coalitions

A group comprised of individuals representing larger groups or organizations working on a specific campaign or issue.

This structure works well for bringing together different groups with a shared interest or stake in an issue.

Example
A group of housing rights groups unite for a three-year long campaign across the city. Organizations, non-profits, and tenant associations are represented by individual members who attend coalition meetings to drive the campaign, take on responsibilities, and offer the resources of their group.
Pros of Coalitions
Groups can incorporate a wider base and include more perspectives.

Participants and groups can engage in larger campaigns.

Cons of Coalitions
Coalitions require a lot of coordination.

Groups may differ in decision-making style, values, ideals, and goals.
Every group operates differently, but below are some general guiding points and questions to consider when you’re forming your group’s structure.
1. Mission Statement

Everyone in your group should be on the same page about your group’s mission and how to articulate it to others.

Can your group members clearly and concisely state your mission statement?
2. Structure

Your group members should have an understanding about how your group is structured.

Is there a hierarchy? Do you have a board? If so, what kind of board?
3. Bylaws or Guidelines

Bylaws explain your group’s purpose and spell out the rules and procedures for how it works. Bylaws can also be useful in ensuring democratic processes and addressing or preventing abuses of power.

Groups are not required to have bylaws. If your group decides not to have bylaws, you may still want to create a guideline document in which you lay out basic rules for how your group operates, including decision-making process + membership requirements.

Does your group have a set of written bylaws or guidelines? Are your bylaws reviewed and updated every few years? Do all of your group members have access to the bylaws?
4. Roles and Responsibilities

Every group should have defined roles and responsibilities, which can be found in your bylaws or guidelines.

Are people’s duties clearly spelled out? If you have formal positions like a board chair or treasurer, what are their responsibilities? What are their term limits?
5. Conflict Resolution

Not everyone in your group will see eye to eye, and different perspectives are healthy for groups to push them to be more effective.

When disagreements become hostile, your group should have a plan to resolve conflicts before they escalate into larger problems.

Does your group have resources to address conflict, such as an action plan or access to an outside mediator? Do you have a system in place so that both parties in a conflict are heard?