

## **THE TEN INGREDIENTS OF A SUSTAINABLE ORGANIZATION**

(Modified from an article from the Institute for Conservation Leadership [www.icl.org](http://www.icl.org))

Usually, organizational efforts to monitor and rehabilitate housing stock, improve water quality, protect lands, build an environmental education program, protect neighborhood resources or create economic viability for a community, etc., take much longer than two or three years. To have true impact and then to maintain what has been won or created, these efforts require groups can sustain their work over many years.

What does it take for community groups to create organizations that can truly sustain themselves and their critical work for the long haul? How can current volunteer and staff leaders modify and structure their work so that future leaders will have a dynamic and stable organization? What types of processes enable groups to adapt and change with the needs and context of their community's issues?

The following "ingredients" outline key elements for organizational leaders to consider as they grapple with these questions and seek to create sustainable organizations.

### **INGREDIENT #1: A COMPELLING VISION, FOCUSED MISSION AND A STRATEGIC PLAN THAT INVOLVES MANY AND GETS USED**

An organization's purpose, vision and goals are the magnet for the people, resources and money that are needed to make the organization effective. Whether the organization is clarifying goals for the first time, or is determining a new focus after years of operation, a strategic plan is critical to success. Good strategic planning involves all the key players in the organization, plus possibly people you serve and those you wish to collaborate with. The planning process will include discussion of and decisions on the organization's vision and mission, three to five year goals, objectives and strategies for each year that will move the group toward their goals, and a workplan that implements the objectives. The strategic plan, once created, becomes integrated into the organization's work and is used regularly (at least quarterly) to assess the organization's progress and to adjust as needed.

### **INGREDIENT # 2: EFFECTIVE AND FOCUSED PROGRAMS**

The core of your organization's success is its program or lead projects. A good program attracts people, which then attracts funding. Programs need to be well thought out, doable, and able to involve many people. Above all, programs must serve a need. Sustainable organizations are able to take a program idea and implement it by creating a strategy with measurable steps. In our rapidly changing world, sustainable organizations are able to assess program successes and weaknesses regularly and change approaches as needed.

### **INGREDIENT # 3: DIVERSE FUNDRAISING EFFORTS**

The most stable and sustainable biological systems often evolved with an amazingly diverse number of species. Likewise, sustainable organizations need diverse sources of income in order to weather the harsh "drought years" and the constantly changing economy. Solid fundraising efforts create long-range plans to have money coming in from as many places and as many people as possible, and for sources to be added every year. In addition, the fundraising efforts are led by a diverse pool of people within the organization so that ownership and expertise are shared by many.

### **INGREDIENT # 4: CLEAR AND ACCURATE FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND BUDGETING**

Clear and accurate financial management provides the needed management tools to make decisions and to plan for the future. The Board of Directors (or steering committee in an all-volunteer project) and typically the Executive Director have the responsibility to create and manage the following elements of a good financial system: 1) a complete and conservative budget; 2) correct accounting record; 3) timely financial reports (at least monthly); 4) financial reports in an understandable form; 5) projections and budget revisions when needed; 6) compliance with government reporting and deadlines; 7) checks-and-balances, especially for cash management and check signing; 8) adequate insurance coverage, and, 9) adequate filing system.

### **INGREDIENT # 5: AN EFFECTIVE GOVERNING BODY/BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

The governing body of a nonprofit is the Board of Directors. The Board of Directors is legally and ethically responsible for an organization and its effectiveness. It also helps to create a larger group of people who are invested in the organization. Board composition should reflect the diversity of the organization's membership and/or constituency. Organizations without effective Boards of Directors are limited in the scope and breadth of their work. Every Board of Directors works a little differently based on how it was founded, its age, and the size of the organization, the type of programs, and the availability of staff. Most effective governing bodies, however, carry out at least the following responsibilities: 1) provide strategic vision; 2) set organizational policy; 3) ensure the organization is complying with all legal requirements; 4) determine program and budget; 5) see that the program is carried out; 6) give and get money; 7) support public relations; 8) choose, support, and evaluate lead staff; 9) replace and train itself, and, 10) evaluate the organization's effectiveness.

## **INGREDIENT # 6: INTENTIONAL VOLUNTEER LEADERSHIP AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT**

The "people resources" of an organization consist of volunteers and staff. Regardless of whether an organization has staff or not, a sustainable organization has key leaders, active volunteers at all levels, and a way to develop leaders throughout these different levels. Leaders and volunteers should represent the diversity of the organization's membership and/or constituencies it works with.

Opportunities at all levels of participation are important: from first time volunteers at an event to working committees, from getting a mailing out to speaking at a public hearing, and from participation in an event to serving on the board for the first time. Ideally, an organization will harness an individual's interest in and commitment to the organization's mission, and then match the individual's availability with the work that needs to be done. This includes cultivating and training volunteers and giving them opportunities to take on new leadership.

For organizations that have staff, attention to hiring professional staff and creating a healthy working environment for them is key. On a day-to-day basis, staff are often the most visible players working on behalf of an organization's mission and goals. Once staff is engaged, systems to create clear expectations, workplans, evaluation procedures, and personnel policies are key to seeing this investment mature and grow over time. Staff also need professional development (training, new position, cross-training, etc.), an abundance of positive feedback, and policies that support their administrative and program work and help to motivate them on a day-to-day basis. Volunteers benefit from the same approach to clear work tasks, training, positive feedback and supportive policies.

## **INGREDIENT #7: COMMUNITY NETWORKING AND VISIBILITY**

Strong partnerships with a broad base of other organizations help to build visibility for the organization in the community and smooth the way for implementation of action projects. The type and amount of networking and collaboration will vary according to each organization and type of project. Collaborations can include businesses, clubs, schools, agencies, key decision-makers, and other organizations.

Organizations also need to let the community know what they are doing and that others are welcome in every stage of a project. An important component of visibility is the cultivation of media coverage. In addition to media coverage, organizations have a large variety of tools to get their message across. Examples include: holding special events, producing posters, staffing a booth at a local fair or at the library, and presenting the results of a program to other groups. Don't forget the power of "word of mouth" as volunteers talk with

friends and family. Volunteers are kept informed via newsletters, memos, and one on one conversation about the most recent events and issues.

### **INGREDIENT #8: APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY THAT SUPPORTS THE ORGANIZATION'S WORK**

Effective organizations have technology that makes work easier, more efficient and effective, especially in the communications area. Historically, nonprofits have tried to make up in labor what they have lacked in technology. But times have changed; volunteer and staff time and energy are a more scarce resource. Technology that's appropriate and used well can maximize our time. Modern computer hardware, software and web, networking and email access for leaders, members and staff is a must these days. Also, adequate phone lines and systems, cars that run well, office space and furniture that don't compromise workers' health and safety and are conducive to both individual and collective work, add to worker and organizational productivity and effectiveness. Sustainable organizations are not acquiring every new "bell and whistle", but continually assessing the effectiveness of their current technology and evaluating what new additions would increase their effectiveness. They make certain that each piece of technology is supporting and serving the work of the organization, not vice versa.

### **INGREDIENT #9: CLEAR COMMUNICATION WITHIN A "LEARNING ENVIRONMENT"**

In natural biological systems, adaptation cannot occur without a feedback loop. Sustainable organizations model this biological wisdom by consistently creating opportunities for learning and change to occur. Practices such as written and verbal evaluation of meetings and training programs, periodic program review, and annual assessments or evaluation process provide a constant feedback and learning loop. By regularly and openly asking "How are we doing?" organizations create an organizational culture where actions are not "mistakes" or "wrong," but instead are an opportunity to learn how to do it better for the next project or the next step.

### **INGREDIENT #10: ABILITY TO CELEBRATE SUCCESSES AND ENJOY THE WORK**

A culture where major and minor victories are celebrated and members, leaders and staff feel valued and appreciated is critical to long-term sustainability. Volunteers especially need to feel they are spending their free time in a place that's creative, fun and life supporting. Music, celebration, food, thank yous and affirmations hold organizations together and help to counter the long-haul struggle of creating a safe and healthy environment for all.