BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL TASK FORCE FOR PREVENTION PLANNING

DEPARTMENT OF ALCOHOL AND DRUG PROGRAMS

This publication was prepared by the California Health Research Foundation and Evaluation, Management, and Training (EMT) Group, Inc., with funding provided by the California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs through contract A-0134-7. The opinions expressed herein are the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs.

Copies of this manual may be obtained by writing to:

California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs
Prevention Resource Center
1700 K Street
Sacramento, CA 95814

Publication No. (ADP) 91-412

139324

Table of Contents

FOREWORD

This volume, *Building A Successful Task Force for Prevention Planning,* and its five companions:

Community Action Guide: Controlling Billboards in Your Neighborhood

Connections for Prevention: Networking Strategies for Alcohol Abuse

Evaluating Community Prevention Programs

Keeping on Track: Setting Useful Goals for Community-Based Prevention Planning

Working with Clergy and Congregations for Alcohol Problem Prevention

comprise part of the final report of contract DADP-A-0134-7 between the California Health Research Foundation, its sub-contractor Evaluation, Management and Training (EMT) Group, Inc. and the California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs (DADP). Together these manuals comprise a basic reference source for those interested in developing, implementing or assessing community-based prevention programs.

The project involved two separate evaluations of community prevention efforts. One assessment examined six community-based prevention planning projects and was initiated during the final months of the two-year contract that each of the six organizations had with DADP. The second evaluation examined the start-up operations of two prevention programs, one in a Black community, the other in a Latino community. We were able to monitor and assess these two programs throughout their entire grant period.

The accepted way of presenting research findings is usually through the final report. However, because of the richness and usefulness of the information collected, and the need to ensure its widespread availability to the field, CHRF and EMT, with DADP encouragement, developed these manuals as the best way to report our findings.

We are very interested in your reactions to this and the other manuals in our Community Prevention Planning series. Your ideas, suggestions and critique will be considered when we revise the manuals.

INTRODUCTION

Task forces can be found everywhere in the field of alcohol prevention planning. Putting together groups of interested people to identify problems, recommend solutions, and implement action is happening at the local, county, state, and national level. Task forces are important to the planning process for the following reasons.

- They provide a forum for a diversity of opinion to be heard and considered;
- They offer an avenue for the participation of people who might not otherwise get involved;
- They spread the ownership of the challenge of alcohol problem prevention throughout a community;
- They provide a mechanism for professionals in many fields to share their expertise and erase the false boundaries that often separate disciplines;
- They create a higher degree of energy -- synergy -- to get things done.

But not all task forces are alike, and some can be a frustrating experience for their members. What makes one task force productive, energized, and effective, while another experiences apathy, conflict, and/or failure? While there is no magic that will ensure the effectiveness of a task force, there are some preventive measures that can be taken to increase the chance of success. This handbook will take a look at some of those measures, and will offer guidance to building a strong, productive, successful task force.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS HANDBOOK?

Anyone interested in the field of alcohol problem prevention, and who participates in task forces or who is responsible for organizing them, will find this handbook useful. And while the examples used in the handbook are drawn from the alcohol prevention field, most of the content about task forces can be applied to other human service settings.

Although it would be ideal to read the handbook before joining or organizing a task force, people who currently are involved in task forces can use the information to diagnose problems their groups may be having and formulate some solutions.

ORGANIZATION OF THE HANDBOOK

The handbook is divided into four chapters. Chapter One is an overview of different types of task forces, focusing on purpose and structure. Chapter Two discusses the nuts and bolts of organizing a task force, such as member recruitment, selection, composition, meeting content and frequency, and tasks. Chapter Three looks at common problems encountered by task forces and possible solutions. And Chapter Four discusses the role of staff, the use of training and outside consultation to enhance the work of a task force, and the use of mini grants awarded by a task force to implement prevention strategies.

The information in this handbook is drawn from the real world experiences of alcohol prevention task forces throughout California. Since task forces have become an important tool for prevention planning, it is essential that groups share their experiences with each other to strengthen the knowledge base. This handbook is a part of that sharing process.

Chapter One

WHAT IS A TASK FORCE AND WHY HAVE ONE?

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In the field of alcohol prevention planning, task forces often are used to gain participation and fresh insight on an issue from people with different perspectives. Groups vary according to specific purpose and structure. This chapter will describe and analyze these differences.

THE PURPOSE OF THE TASK FORCE

Consider these scenarios:

- A series of newspaper articles on the subject impels a County Alcohol Advisory Board to address the rising incidence locally of fetal alcohol syndrome. The Board appoints a task force to study the issue and make recommendations.

- A County Alcohol Prevention Coordinator is asked to organize a task force to review prevention resources available to school-age children and to identify gaps and unmet needs.

- A local alcoholism program receives funding from the Department of Alcohol and Drug Problems to organize a community task force to identify prevention needs and implement strategies.

- A citizen's advocacy group convenes a task force to deal with the proliferation of alcohol retail outlets and billboard advertising within a primarily Black neighborhood. The task force engages in intensive lobbying to affect local ordinances.

- A County Alcohol Program Administrator convenes a task force of professionals in the alcohol field to determine needs and priorities for prevention programming.

The key word in the phrase "task force" is *task*. That is, a task force is organized to accomplish particular goals, or tasks. Unlike a Board or standing committee that has ongoing responsibilities within an organization, a task force is usually time-limited, focusing on specific goals. Those goals may be broad -- as in a task force charged with identifying community-wide prevention needs -- or narrow -- as in a group organized to study fetal alcohol syndrome -- but in either case its tasks have a beginning and an end.

PURPOSES OF THE TASK FORCE

Purpose is one of the key elements of a task force, one which will influence how the group is organized and structured. Most task forces are organized to accomplish one or more of the following purposes:

- *Study and research.* Nearly all task forces are charged with conducting some research on the problem area to be addressed. This may include needs assessments, resource surveys, surveys of approaches taken in other communities, literature reviews, and policy and legislation analysis. Study and research may be the sole purpose of a task force. After the research is completed, the task force presents the information without judgment or recommendations to the person or group requesting it. Other task forces may be asked to develop recommendations based on the research of a previous group. Still others may have the authority to take further action on those recommendations.

- *Advisory.* Most task forces who are asked to study a problem are also asked to make recommendations on priorities and strategies for alleviating problems they have identified. These recommendations are not usually binding, but rather serve as additional information that will be considered by other decision-makers. The likelihood that the recommendations will be adopted will depend on the task force's degree of influence, both personal and collective, on the decision makers.

- *Implementation.* Some task forces have the authority to go beyond a study and advisory role, and are able to actually develop strategies and take action on them. Such strategies may include sponsoring community education events, launching media campaigns, fund raising, implementing prevention programs in the schools, and lobbying and organizing for changes in the law.

These three broad purposes encompass most of the task forces found in alcohol prevention planning. Many task forces are organized for the first two purposes, and some for all three.

The following table summarizes the characteristics of these purposes.

TABLE 1
Purposes of Task Forces

Study/Research	Advisory	Implementation
Studies or conducts research on a problem. Can Include: • Needs assessment • Resource surveys • Policy legislation analysis • Literature reviews • Surveys of other communities May or may not be asked to develop recommendations.	Makes recommendations for action on an issue. May have conducted the research on the issue, or May develop recommendations based on the research of others. May or may not have power to implement recommendations. The weight of the recommendations depend on the personal and collective influence of task force members.	Develop and implement prevention strategies. Strategies may be based on group's own study and research. Strategies may be based on study and research of others. Strategies my include: • Community events • Media campaigns • School-based programs • Lobbying and advocacy • Alternative activities

STRUCTURE OF THE TASK FORCE

Once a task force's purpose is clarified, its structure should be considered. Structure refers to the way in which a task force is organized to accomplish its purpose. These are some basic aspects of task group structure:

- *Size.* How big will your task force be? Is there an optimal size? If a task group's goal is to be inclusive of many different viewpoints and expertise, does this imply a large group?

  In any setting, a group larger than 15 members will find it difficult to function as a committee-of-the-whole. With a very large group there is not enough time for all members to participate meaningfully; and the tendency is for the group to succumb to paralysis, confusion or boredom. On the other hand, a task force of only four or five members is usually too small to accomplish much work, or to accommodate a diversity of viewpoints. Task forces of between ten and fifteen people seem to be an optimal number.

This does not mean that only ten to fifteen people should be involved in the work of the group. Effective use of subcommittees and needs assessment activities can expand the person-power, the range of viewpoints, and the expertise available to the task force's effort. This will be discussed more fully in Chapter Two.

- *Composition.* The composition of a task force will depend on its purpose. The goal is to include people who have the information and expertise you need, the time available to complete the work, the ability to work well with others in a group setting, and who represent various points of view and interests associated with the problem to be addressed. In addition, you may also wish to include people who are associated with specific organizations or constituencies within a community, both to build a bridge to that constituency or organization, as well as to avoid later hurt feelings over exclusion.

  These aspects of task force composition break down into two general categories: personal and affiliational. Personal aspects relate to either the personality, experience, skills, or education of an individual. Affiliational aspects refer to members' ties to other people in the community. Table 2 summarizes these aspects of group composition.

  It is important to consider both categories when selecting task force members. If you select people who have the right "connections", but who are not very interested in the issue, have little time to give to the task force, or who cannot work well in a group, then you will have a task force which might look good on paper but which will not be productive. Likewise, if all your members are interested, eager people who have few affiliations within the community, the work of the task force may go unnoticed. As in most things, balance is the key to good task force composition.

TABLE 2
Aspects of Task Force Composition

Personal	Affiliational
• Expertise or experience • Point of view • Available time • Ability to work in a group • Interest in the issue	• Associated with a particular constituency • Member of an organization • Connections to interest groups

- *Governance.* How will the task force be run? Who is in charge? How will decisions be made? Who are the spokespeople? These are some questions that relate to a task force's governance.

  Most task forces operate under the leadership of a chair or co-chairs. Sometimes these leaders are selected from among the members once the group is convened. In other situations, as when a political entity such as a County Board of Supervisors appoints the entire task force, a chair may be pre-selected by the appointing body. The role of the chair is an important one because it is this person who will set the tone and boundaries for effective (or ineffective) operation.

  A chairperson's job includes running meetings, preparing agenda (or else having input into the agenda which is actually prepared by the task force's staff person, if there is one), overseeing the tasks of the group and any committees, and usually acting as chief spokesperson for the task force. It is critical that the chair have good meeting skills and that he or she is able to bring people to consensus. This does not necessarily mean that the chairperson must be a professional with advanced degrees. It is more important that the chair provide firm but sensitive leadership by keeping people on track, modeling respectful listening, and striving for consensus.

  A task force may also select other officers. A secretary may be appointed to handle minutes and correspondence. A co-chair may be selected, either to share equally in the leadership of the group, or to act as a back-up for the chair (this position may also be called "Vice-Chair"). If co-equal co-chairs are selected, it is essential that these two people work closely together in leading the group. Although having co-chairs may reduce some aspects of the workload, it is often made up for by the increased need for coordination between the two co-chairs.

- *Subcommittees.* Many task forces find that dividing the work among subcommittees is the most efficient way to achieve their goals. These become the "working parts" of the group. Subcommittees are usually composed of task force members, possibly with additional members who have expertise in the subject at hand. For example, a county-wide task force on alcohol problems with a predominant purpose of implementation might break down into any of these subcommittees:
  - Media campaign
  - Prevention in the schools
  - Networking activities
  - Community events

A task force that has been charged with research and study of fetal alcohol syndrome in the county may divide up this way:

- Survey of medical providers
- Interviews with clients and patients
- Interviews with social service providers
- Demographic research

Subcommittees may be created at the beginning of a task force's formation, or added later when new tasks are identified. Subcommittees usually meet between general task force meetings. Depending on the committee and its task, meetings may occur frequently over a limited period of time, and then only occasionally when the bulk of the work is done.

The main purpose of committees is to make the workload of the task force manageable, and to provide members a way to "specialize" in activities of most interest to them. General task force meetings then become an opportunity for members to hear reports from the committees, to question and approve their actions.

In the next chapter, the "nuts and bolts" of a task force's operations will be discussed.

Chapter Two

HOW DOES A TASK FORCE OPERATE?

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What makes a task force successful in its mission and a rewarding experience for its participants? More than good intentions and luck are required. This chapter looks at some the operational aspects of a task force which are key ingredients to success.

RECRUITMENT

Putting together a task force is often difficult. It usually means convincing very busy people to commit their already limited time to yet another project. How can you increase your success at recruiting effective members who meet your criteria?

The first task is to make a list of potential members of the task force. The list should be divided into categories which correspond to the criteria which you have determined are important for membership. For example, let's say that you are a member of a civic group. Your organization has selected the prevention of alcohol abuse as an advocacy focus, with an emphasis on elementary school age children. The organization has decided to establish a community-wide task force whose purpose is to research and study prevention needs and resources of elementary school-age youth in the city, and to make recommendations for strategies to address those needs.

In putting together such a task force, you would want to involve people who represent the following backgrounds or criteria:

- Key school officials, teachers, counselors
- Geographic representation
- Ethnic and cultural representation
- Parents
- Alcohol prevention professionals
- Members of the recovering community
- Civic and community groups with expressed interest in alcohol issues
- County Alcohol Program Administrator or designate
- Member of the County Alcohol Advisory Board

- Member of the business community
- Clergy

This list is not necessarily complete, but it exemplifies some of the important categories of membership for a task group with this purpose.

For each category, a number of different names should be brainstormed. When seeking names for possible members, it is important to ask knowledgeable people within each targeted group or constituency. Attempts should be made to include "new blood" on the task force as well as people who are well known and who have a long history of involvement and activism. You will need to be sensitive to the politics of your situation as you build your task force. There are some influential people who must be asked to join, or else you will risk their lack of support or even active opposition later on. Some of those will decline, and you may ask them for additional recommendations.

MAKING THE REQUEST

When you have determined a list of candidates for the task force, the next step is to ask them to join. Following these steps will increase your chances of success:

- *Send a letter of invitation,* signed by the most influential or highly visible person within your organization who is involved with or supports the effort. In the letter include a brief description of the task force purpose and goals, expected duration and time commitment, and possibly a date and time for a first meeting. Explain what important contribution you believe the person will make to the task force. State that you will follow up with a phone call to answer any questions and confirm acceptance. Some task forces start by recruiting the chair or co-chairs, who then lend their signatures to the recruitment letter for the rest of the members.

- *Tell the truth* about the expected time and work commitment.

- *Follow up with a phone call promptly,* by the date promised in your letter.

- *Offer to meet in person* with a potential member to explain the task force and answer questions.

- *Ask key influential people first,* so that you can use their names when recruiting others.

- *Ask members who agree to join to assist in recruiting other members.*

THE FIRST MEETING

The first meeting of the task force will set the tone of the entire effort, and will be an important factor in convincing some members to remain or leave. People want to know that their time will not be wasted. As a rule, the more organized and efficiently the first meeting is managed, the happier the members will be.

There are several ways to increase the success of the first meeting:

- *Send a packet of information in advance,* including an agenda; a one page summary about the task force, including history, goals and objectives, time frame, scope of work, description of the sponsoring organization, etc.; a list of members; and any other written background materials that might help the members become oriented to their mission.

- *Keep the meeting relatively brief*, no more than two hours, as a rule.

- *Provide time for introductions, questions, and answers.*

- *Encourage the group to choose a standing time* for subsequent meetings, rather than changing from meeting to meeting.

- *Select a chair.* If a chairperson has not already been selected, this should be one of the first items of business on the agenda. To facilitate this, a written job description of this position can be sent in advance in the information packet. Some task force facilitators choose to participate in the selection process by identifying people in advance who they feel would make good chairs and asking that they consider placing themselves in nomination. People often feel reluctant to serve as chair if they think the workload is too heavy. Therefore, it is important to provide a clear job description, and to clarify how much staff support will be available to the chair.

- *Take minutes.* This is frequently a staff role since it frees all task force members to participate fully. Minutes should record the main points of discussion and any decisions made by the group. They then should be sent to all members before the next meeting when they may be reviewed and corrected, if necessary.

- *Encourage action decisions.* People usually are not satisfied with meetings that are "all talk and no action." Even during this introductory meeting, some action decisions can be made, such as to divide into committees, develop a work plan, gather additional information, identify other people to participate, etc. These are organizational action decisions which will facilitate the work of the group in the long run.

LOGISTICAL DECISIONS

Although each task force will vary, there are some general guides to follow when making decisions about meeting day and time, frequency, duration, and location.

- *Day and time* The moment when members pull out their appointment calendars to agree upon a day and time for regular meetings can be a frustrating one. It will be nearly impossible to pick a time that is perfect for everyone, and usually the majority will rule on this issue. When setting a time, members should be fairly certain that they can make at least two-thirds of the meetings. By being flexible about location, and thus sharing the commuting burden, the task force sometimes will be able to accommodate members' time constraints.

  If the group cannot agree upon a standing time, it may be a sign that some members cannot make this group a priority right now and, therefore, should withdraw. Or, it may mean that there are other underlying conflicts that are manifesting themselves as a time crunch. These will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

- *Place* Choosing a fixed meeting place will enable members to remember easily where the meetings will be from one time to the next. If the location is perceived as "neutral territory", it may also take care of possible ownership conflicts. Varying the location has other benefits. Members will share the commuting burden, and participants from different parts of the community will have the chance to act as hosts. Task group facilitators should be sensitive to possible political aspects of meeting location, and should encourage the group to select the location according to these considerations.

  Locations should, of course, be accessible to all members. Long flights of stairs, lack of elevators, and lack of wheel chair accessibility will make it difficult for disabled or elderly participants. Adequate parking is important; and if meetings are held at night, the security of the participants should be considered.

- *Meeting length* There is no magic number for the perfect meeting length. Most people will find it difficult to give up more than one and a half to two hours at a time. Occasional longer working sessions may be appropriate.

- *Meeting frequency* Again, there is no hard and fast rule here. Weekly meetings are usually excessive for most task forces. Groups which go longer than one month between meetings often lose momentum. Sometimes task forces choose to meet more frequently at first -- for example, every two weeks, and then less frequently as tasks are accomplished. If the group divides into subcommittees, these smaller groups often meet more frequently, reporting back to the larger group perhaps every month or two.

RECORDING

Minutes of the last meeting should be sent to the members, along with an agenda for the upcoming meeting, at least one week in advance. This is very important since it will give members a chance to review the minutes for approval and to remind themselves of what they committed to do in between meetings. During meetings, recording ideas or planning discussions on a large flipchart provides a good way to facilitate group discussion and preserve group memory.

TASKS

The heart of the task force is task. It is important to maintain this task focus throughout the life of the group. Task force meetings should do one or more of the following:

- Complete one or more task. (For example, "By the end of this meeting, the members will have developed a work plan for the next six months." Or, "The purpose of this meeting is to brainstorm a list of people to involve in the needs assessment, and to determine how they will be involved.")

- Hear reports from and give feedback to subcommittees who have accomplished tasks since the last meeting.

- Identify what tasks need to be accomplished, and assign people to accomplish them.

A good general rule is that no meeting should be planned simply as a discussion without some sense of what the next step will be. People need to feel as though they are part of a forward-moving effort that is accomplishing tangible goals.

OUTCOMES AND PRODUCTS

Early in the task force, members should be given the chance to identify which of the group's outcomes or products they will focus on. Most people want to get more involved in activity that meets their interests, and which will produce some tangible results. Task group outcomes and products may be assigned to specific subcommittees. The following are examples:

Task Force Purpose	Activities/Outcomes/Products
Research and Study	
Needs Assessment	Develop survey instrument Demographic research Interview key informants Review budgets Visit other programs Locate experts, arrange presentations Analyze/summarize survey results Provide consultation on statistical analysis
Advisory	Read background material on a selected area of the subject, prepare oral/written summary.
Implementation	
Community Education	Stage community events Develop brochures Create a resource manual Write newspaper articles Public speaking
Media Strategies	Develop media packet Prepare public service announcements Hold a press conference

	Appear on local TV and/or radio Design bumper stickers, cocktail napkins, etc., with prevention messages
Alternative Activities	Develop alcohol-free socializing settings Sponsor cultural activities Sponsor sports events
Advocacy and lobbying for policy changes (e.g., alcohol availability laws, billboard advertising, etc.)	Meet with elected officials Coordinate letter writing campaign Research local ordinances Hold house meetings to gain neighborhood support

These are just a few of the outcome or product-oriented activities that task force members can engage in.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLANNING

As with any group working toward a goal, the planning process is critical to the efficient use of time and resources. A task force should undergo some kind of process resulting in a work plan which spans its lifetime. The type of planning process used will depend on the amount of time and resources available to accomplish planning, as well as the purpose of the task force.

For example, a task force that has been called together for a fairly narrow purpose, such as to study available prevention resources and activities for elementary age youth in a community, should be able to plan its work fairly easily. On the other hand, a group whose purpose is to research and study the needs of women in the community relevant to alcohol problems, develop recommendations, and implement selected strategies, has a much more complicated planning task before it.

There are several different approaches to planning available for groups to use. This handbook will not present these in detail, but will describe the basic elements of good planning that any task force should accomplish.

ELEMENTS OF PLANNING

Planning involves identifying where you are going, and how and when you are going to get there. It is a process of moving from the general to the specific, from dream to reality.

There are two main phases to planning: first, setting overall goals and objectives, and second, develop work plans, or action plans that spell out exactly how the objectives will be reached.

Phase 1, setting goals and objectives, should be the work of the entire task force. This should be accomplished within the first few meetings. The group's purpose, which is usually determined before the members come together, will form the overall mission of the task force. The group then should develop goals that flow from that mission.

Goals are broad, general statements of ideal outcomes. Because they are so broad, a task force will only need to develop a few goals -- as a rule, no more than three. A group can arrive at a consensus on goals by going through a *"success exercise"*. In this exercise, members are asked to think ahead to the end of the task force's work and to describe what *"success"* would look like. From this vision of success, goal statements can be developed.

For example, consider a task force that has been convened to study the needs of high risk elementary school-age youth in a specific community and to make recommendations as to which early intervention approaches should be implemented. Prior to beginning its study, the task force would conduct a "success exercise" which would expand on this sentence:

"This task force will be successful if the following occur . . .:"

- We understand as completely as possible the existing needs of our high risk youth. This includes a thorough needs assessment that seeks information from the widest variety of sources possible.

- We become familiar with a variety of early intervention approaches, and determine their effectiveness and appropriateness to our community's needs.

- Decision makers in systems which are in the position to implement early intervention approaches take our recommendations seriously and are committed to implement them.

- Community awareness of the problem is increased.

From this success exercise the following goals are developed:

1. To conduct a comprehensive needs assessment study to determine the needs of high risk elementary school age youth in our community which draws upon a variety of opinion and data sources.

2. To research early intervention approaches used in our community as well as those developed in other communities nationwide, including information on design, implementation, and evaluation.

3. To develop a report and recommendations based on our research which is considered seriously by decision makers, and which has a good chance of being used for implementation.

For each goal, specific objectives should be determine by the task force. Objectives describe the main steps towards achieving a goal, in terms that are specific, measurable, and time-bound. For example, Goal 1 above might have the following objectives:

1. To gather demographic and risk factor information on elementary school age youth in the community by the end of the first six months of the task force.

2. To conduct no less than 25 interviews with key school personnel, alcohol professionals, health professionals, social service personnel, the recovering community, and clergy by the end of the first year.

3. To hold needs assessment workshops with parents and youth at three schools, by the end of the first year.

Objectives such as these should be developed for each goal. Once goals have been developed, the task force may wish to divide itself into subcommittees which will be responsible for developing objectives and any subsequent action planning. Or, the group may decide to develop objectives as a whole, and then create subcommittees to further plan and implement each objective.

Once goals and objectives are developed, the group is ready to move into Phase 2 -- the development of action plans. This activity is usually done at the sub-committee level. An action plan takes each objective and specifies what steps or tasks have to be accomplished to achieve the objective. An action plan also identifies time frames and assigns responsibility to specific people for accomplishing the task.

For example, consider Objective 2 above, that of conducting interviews with 25 people in various professions. The following action plan might be developed for this objective:

TABLE 3
Action Plan

	Action Step	*By When*	*By Whom*
●	Develop list of interviewees		
●	Develop interview format		
●	Select interviewers		
●	Train interviewers		
●	Contact interviewees		
●	Conduct interviews		
●	Compile and analyze results		

Action plans can become the primary tool for both group and individual accountability. Without action plans, groups will tend to flounder as they search for ways to accomplish their goals.

SUMMARY

Most of what has been presented in this chapter can be applied to the workings of any task-oriented group. These are basic operational considerations that can smooth the way for successful functioning. The next chapter identifies some common problems experienced by task forces, and analyzes what some of the reasons are solutions might be.

Chapter Three

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG: HOW TO TURN THEM AROUND

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Your task force has been meeting for a few months now, and things are not going well. Attendance has dropped off. The group cannot seem to agree on anything. No one seems willing to take on additional work outside the regular meetings. Follow-through is poor. Ideas are stale. What is wrong?

Any one of the above problems, and more, may plague a task force. What can be done to help a task force in trouble? And what can be done to prevent some of those problems from occurring in the first place?

Following are seven common problems task forces experience, along with suggestions for both preventive and remedial action.

PROBLEM 1: POOR ATTENDANCE

Are people attending erratically, or has there been a gradual drop-off in overall attendance? Several factors may be causing this.

First, look at the meetings themselves. Are they well-run? Do they use the members' time well? Do they start and end on time? Is the chairperson effective in moving things along? Consider the meetings' logistics, including time, place, frequency, and duration. Too many weeks between meetings will often cause interest to wane; too frequent meetings may be impossible to fit into most people's schedules.

Second, consider how the task force has organized its work. Is there a work plan in place spelling out a clear sense of direction and responsibilities for each member?

Third, are there unexpressed conflicts or controversies which are making the group climate uncomfortable? Likewise, reflect on how conflict has been handled in the past. Has the leadership set clear group norms for appropriate expression of disagreement, or have some members been cut off or criticized for their opinions?

The best way to diagnose the reason for poor attendance is to ask members what they think is happening. Ultimately, the group needs to take responsibility for identifying and then solving the problem. You may choose to bring the issue up as an agenda item, poll members individually, or ask for anonymous written feedback. Your solution will depend on the responses received.

If the reason for the attendance problem is largely structural or operational, such as lack of planning, too long a time between meetings, lack of clarity about responsibilities, etc., the solution will be fairly straightforward.

If the reason relates to group process, such as in the case of unresolved conflict, or lack of group norms regarding expression of disagreement, the solution will be more difficult. Sometimes the assistance of an outside facilitator can be useful in dealing with these situations. It is important to remember that conflict in itself is not bad; it is unresolved conflict that will destroy a group's effectiveness.

PROBLEM 2: WE KEEP SPINNING OUR WHEELS

This problem usually will be a symptom either of inadequate planning or of unresolved conflict. In the first case, the group should undertake a careful planning process to identify clearly what it wants to accomplish, and how. Perhaps the group feels overburdened, and additional prioritization needs to occur. The creation of subcommittees also may help move the group forward out of its rut.

But sometimes, even when a plan has been created, some members may consistently throw obstacles in the path of progress. If this is the case, the role of the task force chair becomes even more important. The leadership must reinforce the norm of honoring the group's priorities and not allowing individual members to continually bring up old business that impedes action. The task force should adopt clear rules for discussion, debate, and decision making so that no single member may hold the group hostage to his or her dissatisfaction.

PROBLEM 3: NO ONE HAS TIME TO DO ANY REAL WORK

The task force members may be quite accomplished at creating jobs to be done, but unwilling to commit themselves to doing them. A frequent reason for this is members' lack of initial understanding of the amount of work required of membership. A written job description specifying duties, responsibilities and minimum time commitment will help clarify this. Even if a task force creates such a job description after the fact, it can often raise the group's consciousness about what truly needs to be done.

This problem may also be a symptom of having a task force that is dominated by people with the right affiliations or names, but with little time or inclination to work on task force matters. One way to remedy this is to create a two-tiered task force, one with the "names", and one with the "work horses". The "names" are not required to meet often, and are drawn upon primarily to use their influence when needed.

PROBLEM 4: WE CANNOT AGREE ON ANYTHING

Some degree of conflict is inevitable within a task force, but chronic conflict that impedes progress is destructive. A task force that is composed largely of professionals in the field who have very strong ideas about what should be done and who have organizational turf to protect, will often find itself mired in conflict. Likewise, a task force may include people with antithetical viewpoints, such as an alcohol retailer irreversibly opposed to any ordinance limiting sales and a representative of MADD equally firm in the opposite position.

If you have put together a group dominated by competing professionals, consider broadening membership to include others from the community with different affiliations. These new members will bring fresh insights and priorities to the group, and a realignment may take place.

If the conflict is over diametrically opposed viewpoints, two options are available. One is for the task force to work out a compromise both can live with. The second is to abandon the issue and make another its priority. The first is preferable, but the second may be necessary. Even when compromise is achieved, it is appropriate for the task force to describe honestly in any final report that differences of opinions existed on an issue; and while compromise was reached, those differences still exist.

PROBLEM 5: LEADERSHIP IS WEAK

What happens when the chairperson does not know how to lead a meeting? When committee chairs do not understand their responsibilities? When the group assumes that the staff person supporting their effort is the real leader of the group?

Job descriptions for the task force's chairperson and committee chairs can help this situation. Technical assistance to the group via training on meeting effectiveness can also be useful. Outside consultants can be used effectively here, relieving the task force staff person from assuming yet another burden.

Staff persons should also clearly describe what they can or cannot provide as support. An overly helpful staff person can stifle the development of leadership among group members.

PROBLEM 6: THE SAME PEOPLE DOMINATE ALL THE DISCUSSION

This problem can be a result of an inexperienced chairperson who does not know how to facilitate discussion. Or, it may be caused by a predominance of professional members who intimidate those who identify as "just a parent" or "just a representative of the neighborhood". Adding more members who are not prevention professionals can balance this out. In addition, the meeting facilitators should be careful to encourage the use of "plain English" instead of professional jargon in task force discussion. Whenever jargon is used, the member can be asked to explain her or his meaning; and the minutes can reflect the discussion by using the "plain English" version.

PROBLEM 7: MEMBERS DO NOT FOLLOW THROUGH ON TASKS

Sometimes this problem is a simple matter of a lack of time limits on tasks. A task assignment is not complete unless there is a *"to be completed by . . ."* attached to it. Lack of follow through can also result from confused priorities. Do members agree upon what actions are to be accomplished first, second, third? Unclear accountability mechanisms is another possible factor.

A common reason is too few people trying to do too many things. The task force should honestly assess what is feasible for members to accomplish. Should additional members be recruited? Are subcommittees being used effectively?

PREVENTION IS THE BEST MEDICINE

A few key preventive measures can reduce the likelihood of many of these problems from occurring, and even can be useful when applied to a problem that has already occurred. Table 4 summarizes these tips:

TABLE 4
Common Prevention Measures and Antidotes
To Task Force Problems

1. Clear written statement of task force members' and leaders' roles, responsibilities, duties, and time expectations.

2. Good planning process.

3. Outside technical assistance on matters such as meeting effectiveness, planning, conflict resolution, when needed.

4. Balanced membership.

5. Strong leadership.

6. Use of committees to get the work done.

In the last chapter, more ideas on how to enhance task force effectiveness will be discussed, including the role of staff support, outside consultation and training, and the use of mini grants.

Chapter Four

SUPPORT STAFF, TRAINING AND MINI-GRANTS

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Since a task force exists for a short period of time, it must be able to function efficiently rather quickly. This efficiency can be enhanced by the approaches described in Chapters One through Three. This chapter will focus on three other elements that can bolster a task force's efficiency: support staff, training, and the use of mini-grants.

THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF STAFF

In most cases, a task force will be convened under the auspices of some organization which will assign a person, usually paid, to function as staff to the group. Sometimes the staff person is charged with recruiting and organizing the task force; other times the members have already been chosen and the staff member takes a less active role in its organization. In both cases, the staff person will play a significant role in increasing the task force's effectiveness. This section will consider what skills and characteristics are important for a staff person to possess, and what functions are critical for a staff person to perform.

Functions

Staff persons fulfill a variety of functions, depending on the nature of the task force. The following is a list of some of those functions:

- Recruiting task force members.
- Organizing meeting place and logistics.
- Facilitating discussion at initial meetings, before chair is selected.
- Contacting members between meetings.
- Taking minutes.
- Preparing meeting agenda (with the chair), mailing the agenda packet.
- Researching certain questions and topics as directed by the members.
- Preparing written background material.
- Writing the task force's findings, recommendations, reports.
- Contacting the media.

In addition, the staff person may find it necessary to go beyond these largely logistical functions and do the following:

- Facilitate conflict resolution.
- Model effective communication and meeting techniques.
- Advocate for the group to the sponsoring organization.
- Facilitate planning processes.

The relationship between the task force chair and the staff person is a pivotal one. By supporting the leadership, a staff person will make the chair's job easier without usurping control of the group.

Characteristics

For a staff person who is charged with organizing a task force from start to finish, enthusiasm and a belief in the mission are vital qualities that will influence strongly the effectiveness of the group. For any staff person, open-mindedness and an ability to communicate with a variety of people are also important qualities. Staff persons must be able to keep a positive attitude when the task force gets bogged down or an activity of the group does not succeed. The ability to help members learn from disappointments and keep going is critical to effective staff functioning.

Staff persons should also be able to stay fairly neutral in regards to the content of the task force's work. The goal is to elicit viewpoints from all sides, and to assist the group in working out a consensus. By remaining neutral, a staff person is better able to maintain the trust of all group members.

Finally, a staff person needs to be comfortable with conflict, ambiguity, frustration, and the other less enjoyable aspects of working with a group. Keeping a realistic perspective about human nature can go a long way in maintaining a positive attitude and sense of balance about the work at hand.

Skills

Good organizational skills are critical for a task force staff person. This includes a knowledge of planning methods, meeting techniques, and protocol. In addition, a staff person should have good communication skills, including the ability to listen well. Solid writing skills are valuable, also.

But perhaps the most important skill area for a task force staff person is what are commonly called "people skills". Group facilitation, relationship-building, morale-boosting, the ability to convey appreciation and respect for all participants' viewpoints and contributions -- these intangibles are what make up a truly effective task force staff person.

THE USE OF TRAINING AND CONSULTATION

Many task forces have found it useful to acquire training and consultation from resources outside of their membership. This assistance covers two general areas. The first is training or consultation for skill building, including planning approaches, effective meeting techniques, needs assessment methods, and conflict resolution, The second is consultation or training on the content areas with which the task force is concerned. This may include information on specific prevention approaches such as classroom curricula, alcohol environment analysis, how to implement a teen center, peer counseling programs, or effective use of the media. Other possible topics might include background information on the general problem area(s) the task force is addressing, such as training on fetal alcohol syndrome, risk factors among youth, the needs of communities of color, or an overview of the existing alcohol service system.

Task forces may anticipate using outside consultants or trainers when developing their overall work plan, and/or they may seek assistance when faced with an unexpected problem or obstacle.

Task forces may also decide to sponsor trainings on prevention topics for a wider audience. In doing so, task force members expand their knowledge of a subject while implementing a prevention strategy -- community education.

The use of outside resources such as these can relieve the staff person of having to provide all informational and organization support to the group, thus reducing the amount of dependence on the staff person. Through the use of consultation and training, individual members can develop skills; and the entire group can develop strength and capability to achieve its mission.

Table 5 summarizes some of the areas in which prevention task forces might receive consultation and training.

TABLE 5
Topics of Consultation and Training Received by Prevention Task Forces

Skill Building	*Alcohol-related*
Planning methodologies and facilitation	Fetal alcohol syndrome
Needs assessment surveys	Teenage drinking
Managing a volunteer program	Family issues related to alcohol abuse
Conflict resolution	Stress management
Effective meeting techniques	Policy issues
Public relations	Server intervention

THE USE OF MINI-GRANTS

Mini-grants refer to small funding awards that a task force grants to local organizations to implement specific prevention approaches. The use of mini-grants is restricted to task forces whose mission includes implementation, and who are given discretion over the expenditure of at least some funds to support prevention activities. Often, these activities are new, innovative, or pilot in nature.

When a task force decides to award mini-grants, the funds are usually distributed to community programs and organizations whose proposed activity matches the stated priorities of the task force. Thus, mini-grants are awarded only after the task force has gone through a prioritizing process and has developed specific criteria against which to measure requests for funds.

The use of mini-grants can be effective for several reasons. First, it is a way to empower a task force by giving it actual control over and accountability for funds. Second, it spreads both the ownership and impact of task force activities to other groups in the community. Third, it is a way to support activities which otherwise might not be implemented.

It is essential that the task force develop a fair and clear process for selecting mini-grant recipients. Many task forces develop request-for-proposal announcements (RFP's) which they mail to organizations who might be interested in applying for funds. Since the amounts are usually modest, the task force should not require applicants to provide detailed proposals, but rather concise statements on intent, capability, and intended outcomes.

Since the task force itself is usually not a legal organizational entity unto itself, but rather receives its funding through another nonprofit organization, the actual transfer and accounting of funds will be done by the sponsoring organization. But it is important that the sponsoring agency actually transfers final decision making authority over the mini-grants to the task force and only intervenes if there are legal or fiscal problems.

The following is sample of mini-grants awarded by prevention task forces to a variety of community organizations:

- Improvement of recreational facilities
- Implementation of a needs assessment
- Presentation of seminars on prevention-related topics, such as stress management, skills for adolescents, drinking and driving, alcohol policy
- Formation of a karate club for youth
- Implementation of alcohol-free dances for youth
- Sponsorship of alcohol-free graduation night activities
- Preparation of a community resource guide
- Development of an early intervention program for children of divorcing parents.

SUMMARY

There is no magic to task force effectiveness. It is primarily a matter of following the same measures that enhance the effectiveness of any working group. By considering the issues described in this handbook, and by applying some of the practical knowledge that has been developed by task forces in other communities, your group will have a good chance of both meeting its goals and providing a rewarding experience for its members.