L09: From Yelling to Jelling: How Neighborhoods & City Hall Can Work Together

LEADERSHIP TRAINING INSTITUTE

National League of Cities

From Yelling to Jelling: How Neighborhoods & City Hall Can Work Together

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FROM YELLING TO JELLING: HOW NEIGHBORHOODS AND CITY HALL CAN WORK TOGETHER BETTER IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Introduction: Setting the table for collaboration between neighborhoods and City Hall

Neighborhoods are in the midst of a fundamental shift in the way that residents, community organizations, and governments work together. In communities across the country, local and neighborhood leaders have put a new emphasis on mobilizing citizens for dialogue, deliberation, and collaborative action.

These kinds of projects have been initiated for several basic reasons. In some neighborhoods, there is no widely shared vision or plan for the future, and residents don't feel a sense of 'buy-in' or support for the major policies or initiatives that affect them. In many places, residents don't turn out in large numbers for neighborhood meetings, except when there is a crisis: in those situations, the turnout tends to be higher, but residents are often angry and the meetings are tense, reactive, and unproductive. Finally, in many neighborhoods there are tensions and divisions between different groups of people, along lines of race, ethnicity, class, and generation.

To address these challenges, neighborhood and community leaders have applied the following democratic principles:

- Most public problems cannot be solved without the effort and energy of citizens and citizen groups (including churches, associations, businesses, and nonprofits).
- Citizens are diverse, and so the key to effective recruitment is reaching out through a wide array of groups and organizations.
- In face-to-face dialogue, people can bridge barriers and go beyond narrow self-interest.
- Large-scale, open-minded deliberation results in public decisions that are fairer, more informed, and more broadly supported.
- Giving people a sense of "political legitimacy" – a sense of status and membership in their community – promotes individual responsibility and leadership.
- When people have a range of reasons to participate, they are more likely to stay involved.

The resulting projects have helped neighborhoods and local governments avoid controversies, overcome cultural divisions, nurture new leaders, generate broadly supported plans, and generate citizen action at a number of levels.

There are several essential facets of this work: recruiting residents; structuring and facilitating productive meetings; supporting efforts by citizens and community organizations to implement action plans; and applying democratic principles to neighborhood organizations and the routine of neighborhood decision-making. This course will help participants use the lessons learned in successful democratic organizing efforts to address all of these challenges.

Core competencies and learning objectives

Title:

From Yelling to Jelling: How Neighborhoods and City Hall Can Work Together Better in the 21st Century

Description:

Citizens are more capable, confident, and skeptical than ever before. Their relationship with government can be very productive – or extremely disruptive. This highly interactive course will describe how some local officials, city employees, and neighborhood leaders are dealing with the conditions and expectations of 21st Century governance. Developed in concert with the Deliberative Democracy Consortium and the National League of Cities, this course will explore the citizen-government dynamic in issues like land use planning, public finance, human relations, policing, and economic development. It will help attendees learn new skills in recruitment, meeting design, facilitation, issue framing, mapping, and revitalizing neighborhood councils and associations.

Length of course: 1 day

Course objective:

This course will give participants the skills (mapping neighborhood networks, recruiting key allies), experience (participation in a recruitment scenario), and knowledge (examples from other communities) they need to begin changing the relationships between neighborhoods and local governments. It will also help them understand how to structure and facilitate productive meeitngs, support citizen action, and sustain democratic practices, so that they can help neighborhood revitalization efforts develop over the long term.

Core competencies:

Each participant will be able to:
1. Develop strategies for recruiting diverse participants.
2. Assist neighborhood and local leaders as they set goals and find ways to measure the progress of their efforts.
3. Facilitate small-group meetings, using democratic principles, so that participants are able to share experiences, find common ground, and generate action ideas.
4. Identify and recruit potential facilitators.
5. Galvanize citizen action and connect citizens, stakeholders, and resources to support action efforts.

Learning objectives:

1a. In a “Recruitment Game,” participants will identify and recruit key stakeholders for a steering committee and pilot small-group discussion.
2a. Using a real-life scenario provided by one of the attendees, participants will design a public engagement effort and frame the issue to be addressed.
3a. In a practice democratic small-group session, participants will get a closer look at how a facilitator operates and how a discussion guide is used.

4a. Participants will discuss the qualities needed in a facilitator and how to find and recruit them.
5a. Using real-life scenarios provided by the attendees, participants will devise ways to support action efforts and strengthen accountability between neighborhoods and City Hall.

Agenda

Opening and introductions

Welcome and quick introductions
Agenda review
Expectations and ground rules

Where the *#$%#^&*! is the table? – Getting past our past

Common challenges faced by both city and neighborhood leaders
Stereotypes that get in the way

10:00 BREAK

Setting the table – Meeting design and framing

Principles for structuring effective meetings
Organizing exercise

11:30 – 1:00 LUNCH

Bringing people to the table (and making it so they'll want to stay)

Recruitment principles
Neighborhood recruitment game
Facilitation principles
Sample small-group session

2:45 – 3:00 BREAK

Making sure the table matters – Supporting action and strengthening accountability

Assisting action efforts:

- Supporting individual volunteers
- Encouraging potential leaders
- Supporting small-group action projects
- Affecting policy at the neighborhood and community level
- Launching issue-based organizing efforts

Using what you've learned in this course

Final questions:

- What are you taking home today that you can act on?
- What do you need to be able to move forward?
- How can you get help?

Course evaluations and certificates

WHERE THE *#$%#^&*! IS THE TABLE?

GETTING PAST OUR PAST

Common challenges and opportunities

Over the last two decades, there has been a dramatic and often-overlooked shift in what citizens want. Ordinary people have become more capable, skeptical, articulate, educated, and diverse. Citizens may have less time for public life, but they bring more knowledge and skills to the table. They feel more entitled to the services and protection of government, and yet have less faith that government will be able to deliver on those promises. They are less connected to neighborhood and community affairs, and yet they seem better able to find the information, allies, and resources they need to affect an issue or decision they care about. Citizens may simply be better at governing, and worse at being governed, than ever before.

In many places, the changing dynamics of the citizen-government relationship result in tension and conflict rather than progress: on issues ranging from land use planning to school reform to the city budget, they often bring the local policymaking process to a screeching halt. In others, elected officials, neighborhood leaders, and other kinds of leaders are finding new ways to work productively with citizens. The result has been a dramatic proliferation of programs and projects that involve large numbers of people in public decision-making and problem-solving.

Local and neighborhood leaders are inspired in this work by a range of challenges and opportunities:

1. To address challenges facing the neighborhood

   Common neighborhood challenges:

   - Low turnout and high turnover at meetings
   - Lack of participation from schools
   - Lack of participation from young people
   - Lack of participation from stakeholders who aren't residents
   - Participants aren't as diverse as the neighborhood
   - Small homogeneous groups of active citizens doing all the work

   Over the long term, these challenges can lead to:

   - Lack of funding and staff time
   - High level of "burnout" among active citizens
   - Low capacity to solve problems (few volunteer hours, few connections to resources)
   - Lack of credibility with local government and other outside stakeholders
   - Lack of attention from local media

   Related challenges facing local government:

   - Lack of trust in government
   - Lack of resources
   - Public meetings in which the public is either angry or absent
   - Conflict between neighborhoods

2. To tap into local and neighborhood assets:

   - Energy, enthusiasm, volunteer time of citizens (including young people and senior citizens);

- Ideas that can be generated in small groups;
- Potential of partnerships and collaborations;
- Resources of community organizations;
- Authority of public officials;
- Talents of new and emerging leaders.

3. To do a better job of:

- Encouraging citizens to take action as individuals – Residents volunteer their time to improve the neighborhood, mostly in small but meaningful ways (mentoring young people, setting up a block party, serving as a crossing guard, etc.)

- Encouraging citizens to take action in small groups – Small groups of people develop new projects to improve the neighborhood.
  Example: A group of "Community Chat" participants in **Delray Beach, Florida**, created the "Maintaining the Village" project to rehabilitate and maintain the homes of senior citizens in the neighborhood.

- Forging relationships between citizens, organizations, and public employees – Residents begin working in partnership with professionals who serve the neighborhood in various capacities.
  Example: Small business owners in one neighborhood in **Buffalo, New York**, repeatedly came into conflict with residents of several nearby halfway houses for the mentally ill. Participants in a small-group discussion on policing, which included residents, police officers, and advocates of the mentally ill, decided to form a "mental health response team" that will bring mental health professionals to the scene of a disturbance.

- Smarter public policy – Public officials make decisions and take actions that match citizen priorities. Sometimes this occurs because public officials were involved in the discussions themselves; in other situations, it happens because the large number of participants in a program came to a high level of agreement on a specific issue and then approached their elected officials.
  Example: When hundreds of citizens took part in democratic meetings in **Springfield, Illinois**, they became convinced of the need to hire more police officers and firefighters of color. In response the city changed a number of its hiring practices, reworking its testing process and beginning a 'lateral entry' program. In the last three years, the police and fire

More neighborhood assets:

People

Residents
Faith leaders
Young people
Senior citizens
Parents and grandparents
Police officers
Homeowners
Renters
Public officials
College students
Professors
Firefighters
Teachers
School administrators
Reporters
Child care providers
Social service providers
High school students
Small business owners
Sanitation workers
Contractors
Landscapers
Activists
Preservationists
Entrepreneurs
Artists
Musicians
Crossing guards

Groups of people

Businesses
Faith congregations
Youth clubs
Sports teams
Musical groups
Service clubs
Ethnic organizations
Leadership program alumni/ae
Fraternities and sororities

Buildings

Church buildings
Senior centers
Historic buildings
Banks
Libraries
University buildings
Schools
Police stations and substations
Firehouses
Service clubs
Restaurants
Grocery stores
Bars and pubs
Shelters

What other assets are there?

departments have become more diverse than at any time in their history.

- Overcoming tensions and divisions – By sharing personal experiences, hopes, and concerns, participants begin to understand one another better, and are able to find some common ground.
  Example: Community liaisons for the school system in **Inglewood, California,** helped organize small-group meetings with parents and other residents. They say that the relationships between African American and Latino parents improved as a result of the project. School-parent relationships also improved.

- Nurturing new leadership – Participants 'find their voices' in the meetings, gain confidence and support from their neighbors, and are recognized as leaders.
  Example: Two of the new Human Relations Commissioners in **Fayetteville, North Carolina,** were participants in a democratic organizing effort who sharpened their leadership skills through the process.

Stereotypes and issues to work on together

Small-group discussion exercise:

1. Divide into smaller groups (if possible, local officials and city employees in some groups, CDC and neighborhood organization members in others) to discuss these questions:
   - What are the three most important things you need to know about us and the context in which we work? (for all the groups)
   - What is the strongest stereotype that local officials and city employees hold about neighborhood leaders? (for the non-government groups only)
   - What is the strongest stereotype that neighborhood leaders hold about local officials and city employees? (for the local government groups only)

   [15 minutes]

2. Groups come back together and share their answers. [15 minutes]

3. Then, divide into small groups again, this time mixing the government and non-government representatives, to discuss:
   - What are your highest aspirations for this work going forward?
   - What are the main areas we should focus on to achieve these goals?

   [15 minutes]

4. Groups come back together and share their answers. [15 minutes]

SETTING THE TABLE

MEETING DESIGN AND ISSUE FRAMING

Principles for effective meetings

To involve people meaningfully and productively in revitalizing your neighborhood, you need to give them chances to speak, listen, learn, and act. Without those four opportunities, it is unlikely that citizens will find common ground or take active roles in improving their neighborhood.

Democratic small-group meetings (and successful democratic organizing efforts) are based on a number of key assumptions. To be a good organizer or facilitator, it helps to remember that:

- People care about the communities they live in, and want to make them better.
- Complex problems call for many kinds of solutions.
- People from all backgrounds and all segments of society have something to contribute.
- When everybody is included in public life, everybody benefits.
- When all kinds of people develop trust and relationships through face-to-face dialogue, new ideas and approaches emerge.
- When people consider different points of view on a complex issue, they uncover common ground and find better solutions.
- When people have a voice in the public conversation, they are more likely to take part in creating and carrying out ideas for community change.
- The more people that are involved, the bigger the impact.
- Community change is more likely to last and deepen when individual and collective actions are tied together.

When structuring a meeting, keep these principles in mind:

- Use small groups for what they're good for (learning, bonding, deliberating, action planning), and large groups for what they're good for (inspiration, establishing a common baseline of information, connecting people with action efforts)
- Always give people a meaningful opportunity to speak and be heard
- Give people a chance to share experiences and talk about why they came
- Lay out a range of views or options as fairly as you can
- Give people the opportunity to decide what the ground rules ought to be
- Provide a malleable agenda – a structure that is open to the needs and interests of the group
- As part of that structure, give people a chance to set goals and plan for action

Framing issues

Written materials can be extremely valuable for helping citizens, public employees, and public officials talk and work together. Whether it is a well-thought-out, single-page agenda or a lengthy discussion guide, this document can give the group enough structure to sustain the meeting while enough flexibility that they can ensure their needs are being met.

There are three key ingredients to consider:

- Initial questions, or an entire session, that helps the facilitator get the group started, guides the group through the process of setting *ground rules*, provides discussion questions aimed at the *personal experiences* of participants, and sometimes includes *scenarios* or cases to help the group relate the issue to their own lives.
- A middle section, or several, to help the group explore the main arguments being made about the issue. Middle sessions are organized around more far-reaching questions such as “What are the root causes of the problem?,” or “What should our goals be?” Every middle session contains an outline of the main *viewpoints* about the issue, written in plain, jargon-free language. These views aren’t simply expert opinions, or the main proposals of policymakers: they reflect the main answers being given to the question, voiced by citizens, experts, and officials alike. It usually also includes a few *introductory questions* to get the discussion going, questions to help the group *analyze the views*, and a set of *summary questions* to help conclude the session.
- Final questions, or an entire session, to help people develop their action ideas and make some initial plans for implementing them. It usually consists of a set of *brainstorming and prioritizing questions*, and a long *list of action ideas* taken primarily from success stories in other communities.

Often the most difficult part is laying out the range of views or options as fairly as you can. Most leaders have strong opinions about the issue they’re organizing around. But they know that they need a large number of people, with a wide range of ideas, to participate in their program – and that, in fact, if the only people they can recruit are passionate, like-minded activists on the issue, the program will certainly fail. They also know that if the participants don’t get a chance to read and discuss all the main arguments being made about an issue, they won’t learn enough about it to form educated opinions.

Much of the power of this work comes from having a diverse set of people compare their experiences, discuss a diverse set of views and options, and emerge with some shared ideas for change. Learning about their community in collaboration with others is what gives them the “ownership” to see those ideas through.

If you want a diverse range of people to take part, you will have to make your frame as neutral and unbiased as possible. This doesn’t mean writing a guide that contains no strong opinions or revealing information. It does mean naming the issue in a way that is broad and widely compelling, including a range of clearly labelled, compellingly written views, and making it clear that the guide is a tool for the discussion rather than a curriculum that will “educate” participants. It also means describing the program in a way that shows you expect citizens to take action, but you can’t predict what those actions will be.

Here are some basic steps for finding the views for your frame:

1. ***Read widely about the issue.*** Look for the coverage of your issue in newspapers, magazines, and journals. Find recent books on the topic, and conduct an Internet search for

helpful web-sites. This will not only help you identify some of the main arguments being made by academics, public officials, and others, it will also help prepare to talk knowledgeably with these people.

2. ***Consult the 'experts.'*** Once you have some background knowledge about the issue and can begin to identify some of the views, make appointments to interview some of the experts: academics, public officials, people who work in organizations dealing with the issue. Take good notes so you can capture some of the language they use when making their favorite arguments.

3. ***Talk to ordinary people.*** Do the same kind of 'grassroots research' you did before – talk to people you know, or strangers you meet about the issue. Ask them the question that headlines your session, and find out what kinds of answers they would give.

4. ***Look beyond the 'poles' of the issue.*** Sometimes, the political debates surrounding controversial issues are dominated by people at the extremes, or poles, of the discussion. For example, the abortion debate is often portrayed as a stark choice between pro-life and pro-choice activists, whereas the views of most Americans fall somewhere in the middle. Make sure that you don't ignore the less visible, more moderate views in between.

BRINGING PEOPLE TO THE TABLE (AND MAKING IT SO THEY WANT TO STAY)

Starting small, thinking big: Hosting a pilot session

The more people you can involve in your project, the more successful it will be. But you don't need hundreds of people and thousands of dollars to begin thinking about how to help neighborhoods and City Hall work together better. In fact, even the largest programs have had modest beginnings. If you want to organize a project like this, there is one easy way to begin: hold a single pilot small-group discussion.

That doesn't mean that your initial group will magically germinate a program reaching thousands of people. However, a single meeting with 8-12 well-chosen participants often turns into a working group which can organize a truly large-scale program.

To get started, you'll need three basic ingredients:

1. **An agenda.** Using the tips in the previous section, create your own agenda or guide – or download one on a relevant issue from an organization like Public Agenda, Everyday Democracy, or the Kettering Foundation.
2. **A facilitator.** You or someone you know may have experience with some kind of small-group facilitation, such as mediation, community education, or total quality management. People with this kind of experience make good facilitators, since similar skills are required.
3. **A site.** Good meeting rooms can often be found in churches, libraries, businesses, schools, firehouses, police departments, or union halls.

The most important thing to consider about your pilot group is the list of invitees. Think about people and organizations with a vested interest in the neighborhood or in the issue you want to address, and the energy and ability to help organize a large-scale program. Ideally, some of these people will already know one another and feel comfortable working together. Invite a group of people who represent different sectors in the neighborhood. Try to invite each participant directly with a phone call, especially if the person is someone who was referred to you rather than someone you already know.

Tell the people you approach that you are inviting a number of key stakeholders to explore the idea of a large-scale program. Give them a brief description of how the small groups work and outline the success of some democratic organizing efforts. Explain that the purpose of the pilot is to try out the process and brainstorm about ways to use it.

To begin the meeting, welcome people, explain again why you invited them, and go right into the first session of the guide you will be using. Ask the group to hold their questions about the guide, process, or potential project until after the session has ended. Participants will get a good sense of the process from a 45-minute practice dialogue, though you and they may want to continue to try out other sessions in the guide.

Afterwards, ask the group: "What did you think?" "Do you think we could involve other residents in something like this?" "How could we recruit people?" "How might we adapt or add to this to fit our neighborhood better?" If you've already begun thinking about what a project might look like, let them in on your plans – but make sure you encourage them to add in their own ideas and 'take ownership' of the potential project. By allowing your potential steering committee to strengthen their relationships and stimulate their thinking by experiencing the process firsthand, you will have built the best possible foundation for your project.

Main recruitment tasks

No matter what kind of organizing context you are facing, there are four main recruitment tasks you should consider:

Task 1: Map neighborhood networks

- List all the groups, organizations, and associations people belong to – think about where they work, worship, study, and socialize
- Network map can be combined with other kinds of asset maps
- Bring map to meetings and forums – use it to show your intent to consider all aspects of neighborhood life

Task 2: Assemble your team

- Recruit team members from a variety of neighborhood networks
- Don't just recruit traditional leaders – find energetic people who are committed to the neighborhood
- Settle on a structure for the group – two tiers (steering committee and coalition) or one?
- Define expectations for team members

Task 3: Set goals

- Consider impact goals (how effort will affect neighborhood) and process goals (number of participants, quality of facilitators, etc.)
- Use open-ended questions to generate ideas
- Look for ways to quantify goals, and plan how you will measure progress
- Explain goals as more people become involved in the effort, and be open to changing or adding to them

Task 4: Recruiting citizens

- Rely on steering group members and other formal and informal leaders to recruit people from their networks
- Make sure recruiters understand project, and equip them with written information (could include flyers, sign-up sheets, 'blurbs' for newsletters or bulletins)
- Consider holding a 'kickoff' meeting.
- Also consider other recruitment methods: posters, billboards, media coverage, door-to-door appeals
- Follow up, follow up, follow up

Details, Details, Details
Logistical questions and suggestions

Consider the kinds of spaces you will need. When planning where your meetings will be located in the community, be sure to look for places that feel welcoming to everybody. If possible, identify a contact person at each site who will work with you.
Also consider this basic checklist:

- Is it well lighted?

- Is it easy to find?
- Is it served by public transportation?
- Is there ample parking?
- Are the rooms and seating comfortable?
- Are there public restrooms? Kitchen facilities?
- Is there a large building with many breakout rooms, such as a community college or large house of worship, where several groups could meet?
- Are the locations “friendly” to all kinds of people?
- Are there places with elevators or ramps for easy access?

Pick out sites for the small-group meetings and think about scheduling.
Site selection: Have your coalition members find locations for the meetings. Some possible kinds of locations include:

- Libraries
- Fire stations
- Schools
- Community police buildings
- Large meeting rooms in corporate or government buildings
- Community colleges
- Neighborhood associations
- Laundromats
- Churches, synagogues, or mosques
- Social service agencies
- Bookstores

Scheduling: Ask people what will work for them, and use that as a basis for your scheduling. Offer a range of choices. To accommodate all kinds of people, you can schedule meetings for different times of day, and different days of the week. Or, you might want to hold all the discussions on the same day in one central location. Pick a day of the week that doesn’t conflict with other regularly scheduled community events, and schedule your small groups for weekly meetings until they’re finished. This is easier for the organizers because you only have to arrange one site. Be sure that it’s a location that has plenty of parking and many breakout rooms. Consider the schedules of the young people who will be participating. What are their school and after-school commitments? What are their transportation needs?

Make plans for child care, food, transportation, and other considerations.

- Will some groups require child care?
- Who will provide it?
- Can we provide transportation?
- Are the groups located in places served by public transportation? (This is a major concern if you are involving lots of young people in your program.)
- Do we need to make arrangements for hearing- or visually-impaired participants?

Set up a process to communicate about program details.
It’s important to have a system in place for facilitators and members of the organizing team to communicate with one another – making sure that people get the information they need to make the program run smoothly. Answer these questions:

- How will we distribute the materials that facilitators need before the first session? (discussion guides, recording forms, newsprint, sample ground rules, step-by-step guidelines for each session, evaluation forms, general information on the program and its sponsors, and plans for an action forum)

- Do organizers and facilitators know whom to call if they have questions or problems? Do we need a process for sharing information quickly by telephone – a “phone tree”? Would e-mail be a good way to keep in touch?
- How will we handle notifying people about weather cancellations?

Facilitation basics

A democratic meeting requires a facilitator who can help focus and structure the discussion and, at the same time, encourage the participants to take ownership of their group. The facilitator's main task is to create an atmosphere for deliberation, one in which each participant feels comfortable expressing ideas and responding to those of others.

The facilitator does not "teach" but instead is there to guide the process. He or she does not have to be an expert in the subject being discussed; in fact, facilitators should not contribute their own personal views at all.

Good facilitators:
- Are impartial; the facilitator's opinions are not part of the discussion.
- Help the group set some ground rules, and keep to them.
- Help group members identify areas of agreement and disagreement.
- Use the discussion materials to bring in points of view that haven't been talked about.
- Create opportunities for everyone to participate.
- Focus and help to clarify the discussion.
- Summarize key points in the discussion, or ask others to do so.
- Are self-aware; good facilitators know their own strengths, weaknesses, "hooks," biases, and values.
- Are able to put the group first.
- Appreciate all kinds of people.
- Are committed to democratic principles.

Being able to stay impartial takes practice and attention to one's own behaviors. Remember to:
- Act as if you are impartial; ***practice*** impartiality.
- Encourage and affirm each person.
- Explain your role.
- Be aware of your own "unconscious" behaviors.
- Resist the temptation to step out of the role of facilitator.

Make sure to ask for the group's help in making this work well for everyone.

A typical democratic meeting would include:

1. **Introductions, roles, and overview of the program.** Give group members the opportunity to briefly introduce themselves. After you have welcomed them and introduced yourself, you may want to include a question about what drew them to this program. Take a moment at the beginning to explain your role as the *impartial facilitator* who is there to help the discussion stay focused. You might say something like, "My role is to keep the discussion focused and moving along. Your role is to share your concerns and beliefs and to listen carefully to others." Also, in your opening remarks give members an overview of the larger effort, how many groups are meeting, the goals of the program, who the organizers are, and information about what will happen at the end of the small-group sessions – such as an action forum or concluding event.

2. **Ground rules.** In the first session, you will help the participants establish their own ground rules for how they want their group to behave together. You might begin by offering one or two suggestions to get them started; then ask members to add their own ideas. Be sure to cover how the group will handle conflict and disagreement, as well as the question of

confidentiality. Post the ground rules where everyone can see them, and remind your group that they can add more to the list as the sessions go on. This is a *very important* step for the group, and will help everyone manage the discussion.

3. **Discussion of the topic/issue.** Depending on the session, this part of the discussion can take many forms. In the opening session, you might begin by asking, “Why are you so concerned about this issue?” or “How has your experience influenced the way you feel about this issue?” In later sessions, the facilitator will help the group explore many sides of the issue. You can help them to expand the dialogue by asking them to consider the strengths and weaknesses of all viewpoints. You might ask group members read the points of view aloud. Ask participants to make a case for a viewpoint they disagree with, or take a position that hasn’t been represented. Use open-ended questions to help members examine the complexities of the issue. Remember to monitor carefully how the discussion is going. Is it time for a clarifying question or a summary of key points? Are all members fully engaged, or are some people dominating? Is the discussion wandering? In the final session, the discussion will include helping participants think about action – what are we going to do about this issue in this neighborhood? This can be done by reviewing common themes from earlier sessions; generating ideas for possible actions to be taken by individuals, group members, or large numbers of people; helping people prioritize their ideas; and planning for an action forum.

4. **Summary and common ground.** Ask participants to summarize the most important results of their discussion. “Did any common concerns emerge?” “In what ways do you see the issue differently as a result of considering others’ views?” Participants will likely have some common concerns and goals even though they have different ideas about how to address or achieve them. Summarizing like this will give participants a shared sense of progress and purpose.

5. **Evaluation and next steps.** In the final minutes, ask participants for their thoughts on the experience. What did they like or not like about the discussion? How well did the ground rules work? What, if anything, would they like to change? How do they feel about the group facilitation? These questions will provide an overall sense of how things are going.

Skills for facilitators

Inexperienced facilitators can do an excellent job as long as they remain impartial and ask for help from the group. As they become more experienced, facilitators improve by continuing to hone these skills:

Reflecting – feeding back the content and feeling of the message.
"Let me see if I'm hearing you correctly..."

Clarifying – restating an idea or thought to make it clearer.
"What I believe you are saying is..."

Summarizing – stating concisely the main thoughts.
"It sounds to me as if we have been talking about a few major themes..."

Shifting focus – moving from one speaker or topic to another.
"Thank you, Juan. Do you have anything to add, Jane?"
"We've been focusing on views 1 and 2. Does anyone have strong feelings about the other views?"

Using silence – allowing time and space for reflection by pausing between comments.

Using non-verbal and verbal signals – combining body language and speech to communicate, for example, using eye contact to encourage or discourage behaviors in the group. Be aware of cultural differences.

Here are some other tips for being an effective facilitator:

Be prepared. The facilitator does not need to be an expert on the topic being discussed, but should be the best prepared for the discussion. This means understanding the subject, being familiar with the discussion materials, and thinking ahead of time about the directions in which the discussion might go.

Set a relaxed and open tone. Welcome everyone and create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. Well-placed humor is always welcome.

Establish clear ground rules. At the beginning of the sessions, help the group establish its ground rules by asking the participants to suggest ways for the group to behave. Here are some ground rules that are tried and true:

- Everyone gets a fair hearing.
- Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
- One person speaks at a time.
- Let everyone have a chance to talk – don't dominate the discussion.
- You can disagree, but be respectful – don't label, stereotype, or call people names.
- Speak for yourself, not for others.
- What is said in this group stays here, unless everyone agrees to change that.

Monitor and assist the group process.

- Keep track of how the group members are participating – who has spoken, who hasn't spoken, and whose points haven't been heard.

- Consider splitting up into smaller groups to examine a variety of viewpoints or to give people a chance to talk more easily about their personal connection to the issue.
- When deciding whether to intervene, lean toward non-intervention.
- Don't talk after each comment or answer every question; allow participants to respond directly to each other.
- Allow time for pauses and silence. People need time to reflect and respond.
- Don't let anyone dominate; try to involve everyone.
- Remember: this is a dialogue, not a debate. If participants forget this, don't hesitate to ask the group to help re-establish the ground rules.

Help the group grapple with the content.
- Make sure the group considers a wide range of views. Ask the group to think about the advantages and disadvantages of different ways of looking at an issue or solving a problem.
- Ask participants to think about the concerns and values that underlie their beliefs and the opinions of others.
- Help the discussion along by clarifying, paraphrasing, and summarizing the discussion.
- Help participants to identify "common ground," but don't try to force consensus.

Use probing comments and open-ended questions which don't lead to yes/no answers.
This will result in a more productive discussion. Some useful questions include:
- What seems to be the key point here?
- What is the real disagreement here?
- What would you say to support (or challenge) that point?
- Please give an example or describe a personal experience to illustrate that point.
- Could you help us understand the reasons behind your opinion?
- What experiences or beliefs might lead a person to support that point of view?
- What do you think people who hold that opinion care deeply about?
- What would be a strong case against what you just said?
- What do you find most persuasive about that point of view?
- What is it about that position that you just cannot live with?
- What have we missed that we need to talk about?
- What information supports that point of view?

Reserve adequate time for closing the discussion.
- Ask the group for last comments and thoughts about the subject.
- Thank everyone for their contributions.
- Provide some time for the group to evaluate the process.

Here are more helpful questions to ask the group…

…to start the discussion:
- What experiences have you, or people you know, had with this issue?
- How is this an issue or problem in your community or organization?
- Why do you think it's such a problem? How does it affect you personally?

…to get to a key point:
- What is at the heart of this issue?
- Could you give an example or describe a personal experience to illustrate that point?

…to use when there is disagreement:
- What do you think he is saying?

- What bothers you most about this?
- How does this make you feel?
- What is the impact of what was just said on you?
- What is blocking the discussion?
- What might you be willing to give up in order to come to some agreement?
- What don't you agree with?
- Could you say more about what you are feeling?
- Could you say more about what you think?
- What makes this so hard?

…to help participants explore a range of views:
- What do you find most persuasive about the point of view?
- Does anyone have a different view?
- What do people who disagree with that view say?

…to use when people are feeling hopeless:
- Say a little about how that makes you feel.
- Is there any hope?
- Can the problems that you are talking about be solved in any way?
- Can the problems that you are talking about be minimized?

…to get at underlying values:
- What are the most important concerns that underlie your views?
- What do you think people who hold that opinion care deeply about?
- What experiences or beliefs might lead decent and caring people to believe in that view?
- Are there any common values, concerns, or ideas that unite all or most members of our group, despite our different views on the issue?

…to help participants think about next steps:
- With what approach, if any, would most of this group agree?
- What is already being done in the community to deal with this problem?
- What are some first steps in dealing with this problem?

...to use in closing:
- What are the key points of agreement and disagreement about today's session?
- What have you heard today that has made you think, or has touched you in some way?

A facilitator can even establish a contract with the group, in which the facilitator agrees to:

1. Manage the time
   - Start and end the group on time
   - Help the group monitor the distribution of "air time"

2. Manage the process
   - Help the group establish ground rules
   - Serve as "holder of the ground rules"
   - Keep the discussion on topic (control "drift")
   - Make or ask for summaries
   - Help the group to find common ground

3. Protect individuals and the group
   - Manage disputes

4. Serve as liaison
   - Act as a contact with the broader organizing effort
   - Manage logistics

5. Stay impartial and out of the content discussion

…and the participants agree to:

1. Actively participate in the discussion
2. Support and abide by the ground rules
3. Listen carefully to others
4. Maintain an open mind
5. Strive to understand the position of those who disagree with you
6. Help keep the discussion on track
7. Address your remarks to the group members rather than the facilitator(s)
8. Give feedback to the facilitator(s)
9. Value your own experience and opinions
10. Engage in respectful disagreement
11. Not interrupt each other

To evaluate your performance as a facilitator, ask yourself these questions:

- Did I set a positive tone?
- Did the group set ground rules? Was there agreement?
- Did I help people connect with the issue?
- How well did I manage the discussion?
- How did I deal with difficulties?
- Have I helped to advance the group’s understanding of the issue(s)?
- Did I make sure the different views were expressed?
- Did I try to involve everyone in the discussion?
- Was I a good listener?

Facilitating discussions about action

Helping a group develop action ideas requires some different skills and techniques than facilitating a discussion about personal experiences or policy options. Here is a framework for a two-hour action planning session which has been used by democratic organizers on many different issues:

Part 1 – Thinking about ways to make a difference
(30 minutes)

1. Break into groups of two or three people. In your group, spend a few minutes talking over possibilities on the "Action Ideas" list.
2. Think about action ideas that you believe would work for your neighborhood. You might talk about ideas from the lists, or you might invent new ideas.
3. Of all the ideas, which ones seem best? Why? Try to settle on two or three.
4. Come back together in the whole group. List the 2-3 best action ideas each group came up with.

Part 2 – Setting priorities for the action forum
(30 minutes)

From the lists we made in our brainstorm, we will now choose three or four action ideas that we think could make the most difference in our community. We will take these ideas to the action forum.

Instructions for setting priorities

1. Start by looking at the action ideas you have listed. If some of the ideas are nearly alike, combine them.
2. The next step is to narrow down our lists. We will select a total of no more than eight of our favorite action ideas.

To narrow down the lists:

- Each person will get three votes. Our facilitator will give each of us three colored stickers (or something similar) for this.
- Each of us will vote for the ideas we like best. We can use all three votes on one idea, or we can spread them around.
- Look at the ideas that have the most votes. There will probably be about eight.

3. Next, we will narrow down our lists again. Look at the eight ideas that you picked in Step 2. Which three or four of these seem most practical, useful, timely, and important? To help us talk about this, we will use the following questions:
   - What would it take to make these ideas become real? What help or support would we need?
   - What resources are already in place to help out? What are we already good at doing?
4. If you now have only three or four ideas left, you are finished! You are ready to go to the action forum. (Skip step 5 and go on to step 6.)

Tips for facilitators – Brainstorming and setting priorities

- This session has three parts. Use the time suggested for each as a guide.
- Post a sheet that lists any and all action ideas that the group came up with in previous sessions.
- Suggest that the recorder write on a flipchart, so that everyone can see.
- Today, your group will make a short list of action ideas to present at the action forum. Some ideas that individuals feel strongly about may not end up on that list. Tell people that they will have a chance to add their own ideas at the action forum.
- Adapt the instructions for selecting and setting priorities (Part 2 of this session) to suit your needs. Do what works best for your group. Use the numbers provided as a guide only.

5. If you still have more than four ideas, vote again. (Use the same procedure as in Steps 2a and 2b.) After the vote, select the three or four ideas that get the most votes. These are the ideas you will take to the action forum. You are finished!
6. Make sure that you write your final three or four ideas down on a sheet of paper.

Part 3 – Working on an action idea as a group
(40 minutes)

You don't have to wait for the action forum to start working on an action idea. If your group has come up with an idea you want to tackle together, go ahead. You might want to pick out one or two of the more immediate, short-term ideas. Ask yourselves:

1. Is this idea already being tried in the neighborhood or community? How could we support those efforts?
2. What would it take to turn this idea into reality?
3. What community assets could we use to help move this idea forward?
4. What would our next steps be? What other groups might we link up with?
5. What kinds of support or help do we need in order to take these steps?
6. How should we split up the tasks and responsibilities involved in making the idea work? What role should each of us play?

(See Tab 6 for more ideas on how to support action efforts.)

Suggestions for challenging situations

As a facilitator, you are bound to run into situations where you just don't know what to do. One good rule of thumb is to ask the group: "I'm doing my best here, but I'm having trouble with [name the problem] – what would you like me to do about this?" This kind of question may solve the problem immediately; it also shows the group that you are trying to serve them, and that it is their responsibility to help you.

Here are some of the most typical facilitation challenges, with some suggestions for dealing with them:

Problem: Certain participants don't say anything, seem shy.	**Possible responses:** Try to draw out quiet participants, but don't put them on the spot. Make eye contact – it reminds them that you'd like to hear from them. Look for nonverbal cues that indicate participants are ready to speak. Frequently, people will feel more comfortable as the discussion goes on, and will begin to participate. When someone comes forward with a brief comment after staying in the background, you can encourage him or her by conveying genuine interest and asking for more information. And it's always helpful to talk with people informally before and after the session.
Problem: An aggressive or talkative person dominates the discussion.	**Possible responses:** As the facilitator, it is your responsibility to handle domineering participants. Once it becomes clear what this person is doing, you ***must*** intervene and set limits. Start by limiting your eye contact with the speaker. Remind the group that everyone is invited to participate; "Let's hear from some folks who haven't had a chance to speak yet." If necessary, you can speak to the person by name. "Charlie, we've heard from you; now let's hear what Barbara has to say." Be careful to manage your comments and tone of voice – you are trying to make a point without offending the speaker.
Problem: Lack of focus, not moving forward, participants wander off the topic.	**Possible responses:** Responding to this takes judgment and intuition. It is the facilitator's role to help move the discussion along. But it is not always clear which way it is going. Keep an eye on the participants to see how engaged they are, and if you are in doubt, check it out with the group. "We're a little off the topic right now. Would you like to stay with this, or move on to the next question?" If a participant goes into a lengthy digression, you may have to say: "We are wandering off the subject, and I'd like to give others a chance to speak."
Problem: Someone puts forth information which you know to be false. Or, participants get hung up in a dispute about facts but no	**Possible responses:** Ask, "Has anyone got more information for us on this?" If no one offers a correction, offer one yourself. And if no one knows the facts, and the point is not essential, put it aside and move on. If the point is central to the discussion, encourage members to look up the information before the next meeting. Remind the group that experts often disagree.

one in the group knows the answer.	
Problem: Lack of interest, no excitement, no one wants to talk, only a few people participating.	**Possible responses:** This rarely happens in a democratic small-group discussion, but it may occur if the facilitator talks too much or does not give participants enough time to respond to questions. People need time to think, reflect, and get ready to speak up. It may help to pose a question and go around the circle until everyone has a chance to respond. Occasionally, you might have a lack of excitement in the discussion because the group seems to be in agreement and isn't coming to grips with the tensions inherent in the issue. In this case, the facilitator's job is to try to bring other views into the discussion, especially if no one in the group holds them. The best way to do this is by using the guide: "Take a look at View 3 – do you hear people in the neighborhood making this kind of an argument?" You can also ask, "Do you know people who hold other views than the ones being expressed here? What would they say about our conversation?"
Problem: Tension or open conflict in the group. Perhaps two participants lock horns and argue. Or, one participant gets angry and confronts another.	**Possible responses:** If there is tension, address it directly. Remind participants that disagreement and conflict of ideas can be very helpful in the long run. Explain that, for conflict to be productive, it must be focused on the issue: it is acceptable to challenge someone's ideas, but personal attacks are not acceptable. You must interrupt personal attacks, name-calling, or put-downs as soon as they occur. You will be better able to do so if you have established ground rules against this kind of behavior. Don't hesitate to appeal to the group for help; if group members are committed to the ground rules they set, they will support you. As a last resort, consider taking a break to change the energy in the room. You can take the opportunity to talk one-on-one with the participants in question.

Here are some suggestions for facilitating discussion of a particularly controversial issue:

- Consider bringing along a "talking stick" – only the person holding the talking stick may speak, and so the device helps prevent shouting matches and interruptions.
- Always probe for values, motivations, and why people make their statements of fact, belief, and opinion.
- When wrestling with when to intervene, err on the side of non-intervention.
- Thank each person for his or her contribution after or during the session.
- Maintain your sense of humor.
- Ask "Why do you believe that?" or "Could you help us better understand what you mean?" or "How did you arrive at that opinion?"
- Give people time to think.
- Encourage people to speak up if they are offended by something that was said. Wait until the speaker finishes her/his remark, and then allow the person an opportunity to explain what was hurtful about it.
- If a dominating person makes a strong or offensive case for a certain point of view, others may be reluctant to counter it. You can follow up with, "Would anyone like to share a

different point of view?"

- When tension becomes apparent, identify it instead of trying to ignore it. "It feels like there is some animosity here," or "Why is this particular point so divisive?"
- If things begin to get out of hand, try "freezing" the moment. For example, "Stop! We're going to take time out for a few minutes. Let's look at what has happened here. What triggered this? How can we get back on track with the ground rules we established back at the beginning of our meeting?"
- Acknowledge that discussing controversial issues is hard work, and thank everyone for participating and for helping to bring up a wide range of viewpoints.

Finally, here are some tips for facilitating cross-cultural communication:

Sensitivity, empathy, and familiarity with people of different backgrounds are important qualities for the facilitator. If you have not had the opportunity to spend time in a multiracial or multiethnic setting, get involved in a community program that gives you that opportunity.

Even though some of the conversation may revolve around differences, set a tone of unity in the group. After all, we have more similarities as human beings than differences as members of particular racial or cultural groups. Having co-facilitators from different ethnic groups helps establish cross-cultural unity in the group.

Help people to appropriate and respect their own and others' communication styles. People's cultural backgrounds affect the ways in which they communicate. For example, some cultures tend to be more outspoken and directive, while others are more reserved. Some cultures value listening more than speaking. In other cultures, taking a stand is of utmost importance. Help group members to realize there is no "right" way to communicate, and that understanding one another takes practice! Your facilitation should demonstrate that each person has an important and unique contribution to make to the group.

Don't let participants' awareness of cultural norms lead to stereotyping. Generalizations are just that: they don't necessarily apply to individuals within a culture.

Remind the group, if necessary, that no one can represent his/her entire culture. Each person's experiences, as a unique individual and as a member of an ethnic group, are unique and valid. As one African American woman said of black-white communication, "When you have some African Americans in your group, the whites shouldn't think they are getting 'the black perspective'; but without African Americans in the group, whites won't hear *any* black perspective."

Encourage group members to talk about their own cultures, rather than other people's cultures. **In this way, they will be less likely to make inaccurate generalizations about other people. Also, listening to others recount their own experiences breaks down stereotypes and broadens understanding**

Don’t forget the fun!

One common reason people participate is that they want to make an impact on an issue or decision they care about. But there are many other incentives that will get people to take part – and, in particular, to keep them coming back for more. When you are planning your process, keep these other motivating factors in mind:

- Food
- Drink
- Music
- The arts
- Games
- Prizes

Perhaps the most critical motivation is simple: **kids**. Parents of young adults want to participate in things that will show off the talents, skills, and contributions of their children. Parents of young kids have many of the same needs, plus the desire to take part in activities that come with free child care attached. Overall, older people will want to participate in things if they know younger people will be there too (and the opposite is also true far more than one might expect). Grandparents, godparents, aunts, and uncles can be compelled by many of these same motivations.

MAKING SURE THE TABLE MATTERS
SUPPORTING ACTION EFFORTS AND STRENGTHENING ACCOUNTABILITY

Democratic principles in action

Three basic elements have been critical for helping citizens and governments take action on critical issues:

- Well-run meetings help citizens 'take ownership' of action ideas.
- Creating a working relationship between citizens and public officials, and between citizens and public employees, combines citizen energy with access and expertise.
- Involving large numbers of people and organizations shows public officials that a diverse, representative critical mass of residents will stand behind the policy recommendations that emerge from the discussions. The size of the turnout also gives people a sense that progress is possible: that they are part of a neighborhood or community that is capable of solving its problems.

When you are trying to help citizens implement their action ideas, there are a number of other principles to keep in mind:

Helping people make connections – Citizens are likely to lose steam if they don't know the people who can help them bring their ideas to fruition. They may need public employees, public officials, social service providers, or other 'practitioners' who have the access and professional expertise to:

- Help make the idea more realistic and workable;
- Help 'pitch' the idea to any decision-makers whose approval may be needed for the idea to move forward;
- Help find the necessary resources, financial or otherwise; or
- Implement the idea themselves, because of the authority they already have.

Ideally, these kinds of connections will be made in the democratic small groups themselves (if these kinds of professionals have been successfully recruited), or at an action forum. If not, a democratic organizer can make the connection later on. Either way, it is important for an organizer to monitor how the relationship between the professional and the residents is working.

Using large-group events to provide deadlines, support, and recognition – People are more likely to follow through on their promises if they make those commitments publicly in front of a large group of people – AND if they know that they will have to report on their progress at a similar meeting in the future. Whether you are trying to encourage individual volunteers who have signed up to help a cause, small action groups who will be working on a particular action idea, or public officials who have promised to use the input they have received, large-group meetings are critical as both a carrot and a stick.

Helping people find resources – Finding resources can be a daunting challenge, but that is partly because people tend to overlook some of the connections and opportunities that are closest at hand. It may be helpful to provide action groups with assistance in fundraising, grantwriting, or similar skills, but make sure you also look to the leaders and stakeholders who already know about the project. The people who serve on your steering committee, or who have attended one of the events, may represent organizations which can provide in-kind or financial resources. They may also know who to talk to in the community to find particular kinds of grants, services, or other forms of assistance. Also, remind action groups that the other residents living in the neighborhood (or people who work there) represent a wealth of skills, talents, connections, and other resources themselves. Even if those people did not participate in the small-group discussions, they may be willing and able to contribute to action efforts.

Helping people use data to support their efforts – People are more likely to gain funding and political support for their action ideas if they are able to back up their arguments with research. Many organizers have been able to accomplish this by connecting citizens with university professors or public employees who have the relevant skills and knowledge.

Enlisting the media to help tell the story – Reporters and other media professionals are sometimes reluctant to cover a democratic organizing effort, especially if there are no dramatic conflicts at stake. They often consider these kinds of meetings to be 'just talk,' and do not see the difference from the way the neighborhood was operating before. However, once citizens are actively working to implement their ideas, reporters are quicker to recognize the outlines of the story. It is helpful to contact the media in the early stages of your effort, partly as a way of beginning the relationship – but it is critical to reach out to them as the action forum approaches and as action groups begin moving forward. Articles in the newspaper and segments on television or radio can help to legitimize action efforts and give residents a jolt of confidence and recognition.

Giving people a sense of legitimacy – Once people begin working on an action idea, particularly if it has something to do with public policy, they often start to wonder "Who are we to be doing this?" "Will the 'powers that be' ever take us seriously?" Some action groups have even asked a city council or some other elected body to give them an official title and formally commit to considering the group's conclusions. Whenever possible, work with public officials and other decision-makers to help 'legitimize' the groups – an official title may be useful, but it may be even more powerful for a decision-maker to tell the group in public why their work will be influential and appreciated.

Suggestions for supporting different kinds of action efforts

One of the strengths of democratic organizing efforts is that they encourage citizens to take action. For an organizer, however, this also makes it difficult to know exactly what to expect: once residents have examined an issue closely, they may decide to take action as individuals; they may want to form committees or teams to take on particular ideas; or they may want to work with public officials to promote policy changes. Certain individuals may even want to run for public office, or take on some other formal leadership role in the community. It is not unusual for a democratic organizing project to result in action efforts at all of these levels.

The principles in the previous section ("the ingredients") may be helpful no matter what kinds of action ideas participants want to pursue. More specifically, here are some basic guidelines to follow for each of the different levels of action:

Supporting individual volunteers.
- Find out: Is the volunteer interested in joining an existing effort, or does he/she want to start a new project?
- Connect interested residents with relevant organization(s) offering volunteer opportunities, and/or with other residents who have similar interests, and/or with public employees or other 'issue practitioners.'
- Highlight the work of particular volunteers at neighborhood meetings.

Encouraging potential leaders.
- Involve potential leaders in committees or action efforts.
- Give potential leaders visible roles at action forums or other large-group meetings.
- Connect potential leaders with formal community or neighborhood leadership programs.
- Encourage potential leaders to run for elected office, or promote their candidacy for appointed positions.

Example: The "KCK Study Circles" program in Kansas City, Kansas, has partnered with Neighborhood Leadership, a project that operates under the auspices of the Chamber of Commerce and the Local Initiatives Support Council, to offer leadership training to residents who have taken part in the democratic small-group meetings. Participating teams must have at least six people, two of whom must be youth (between 14 and 24 years of age). The course includes six sessions that teach leadership, communication, and facilitation skills. Each team must develop action ideas and plans to implement them; each project receives $500 to support implementation.

Supporting small groups which want to work on an idea they generated in their dialogue.
In the process of developing action ideas, democratic small groups often decide that they want their group to stay together to implement the idea. They will be more likely to succeed if you:
- Help the group select its leaders. There are two key functions to consider: *convening* the group, and *facilitating the group process* (the person who facilitated the dialogue sessions may not want to continue in that role). Sometimes the same person can do both. Better yet, identify a convener who demonstrates leadership qualities; *AND* a facilitator, whose exclusive job is to help the group do its work with a good process.
- Suggest that the group write some specific objectives using the SMART framework: Specific, Measurable, Aggressive yet Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound.
- Provide the group with the project planning grid on the last page in this section.

- Connect the group with public employees or other 'issue practitioners' who have relevant expertise or access.
- Give the group a chance to report on its progress (or ask for help) at an upcoming neighborhood meeting.
- Let reporters and other media professionals know about the group's efforts.

(See also the box "Action groups: Ten steps for success," on this page)

Example: One neighborhood in Buffalo, New York, has several halfway houses for the mentally ill. Local business owners often called on the police to deal with incidents involving halfway house residents; the officers are generally not trained to work with mentally ill people, and the situation would sometimes get worse rather than better. A small group that met as part of a city-wide police-community relations project talked about this problem and ways to prevent it. They decided to create an "emergency response team" for these situations. They worked with a state legislator, the director of mental health services for the county, and several peer leaders who had successfully battled mental illness to implement the idea.

Supporting new action groups.
Separate democratic discussion groups will often come up with the same action idea. You may want to set up a new committee or task force to work on this idea, and ask project participants or other interested people to join it. The group will be more likely to succeed if you:

- Give them a set of discussion questions that will help them get to know each other by talking about the reasons they are committed to this action idea:
  - Introduce and describe yourself to the group.
  - What is your connection to this neighborhood? How long have you lived or worked here?
  - What experiences in your life make you feel that this action idea is necessary and promising?
- Help the group select its leaders. There are two key functions to consider: *convening* the group, and *facilitating the group process*. Sometimes the same person can do both. Better yet, identify a convener who demonstrates leadership qualities; *AND* a facilitator, whose exclusive job is to help the group do its work with a good process.
- Suggest that the group write some specific objectives using the SMART framework: Specific, Measurable, Aggressive yet Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound.
- Provide the group with the action planning grid on the last page in this section.
- Connect the group with public employees or other 'issue practitioners' who have relevant expertise or access.

Action Teams: Steps for Success

1. **Get to know each other better.**
   Try a team-building exercise.

2. Establish group norms.
   How will decisions get made?
   Will we use ground rules?
   How often and when will we meet?

3. Clarify task(s).
   Prioritize action ideas, with an eye toward "do-ability" and importance.
   Sort by short-term and long-term.
   Identify any "easy wins."

4. Research the task.
   Who else is working on this task?
   How have other neighborhoods or groups approached this task?
   Are there other people who should be in this conversation?
   What resources (people, access, money, information) do we need to help us?
   What barriers are out there that we need to address?

5. Develop a plan.
   Identify all tasks that need to be accomplished.
   Identify necessary resources.
   Assign responsibilities and timetable for each task in the plan.

6. Implement the plan – make it happen!

7. Document your efforts.
   Record your progress as you go.

8. Assess progress.
   What worked? What didn't?
   What could we do differently?

9. Tell the story.
   Share your successes and challenges with other action groups and the broader community.

- Give the group a chance to report on its progress (or ask for help) at an upcoming neighborhood meeting.
- Let reporters and other media professionals know about the group's efforts.

(See also the box "Action groups: Steps for success," on the previous page)

Example: In Fort Myers, Florida, participants in a democratic organizing effort complained about the lack of grocery stores in city neighborhoods. At their action forum, organizers formed a task force to work on the idea of a new shopping center in the Dunbar neighborhood. The group began working with developers, public officials, a local CDC, and the local newspaper. The group created a market survey, and helped put together a package of public and private funding for the developer. Two years later, the shopping center was built.

Encouraging existing community groups to take on action ideas.
Sometimes an action idea emerges which is a logical fit for an existing organization in the neighborhood or community. If people who are members or leaders of this organization were involved in the small groups, these people may want to take the lead in working with the organization.

- If it seems appropriate, arrange a meeting between the organization and the project participants who want to work on the action idea.
- If it seems necessary, provide the same kinds of assistance you would provide new action groups (see above).
- Invite leaders and members of the organization to a future neighborhood meeting, and recognize them during the meeting for their willingness to work on the idea.

Example: Participants in one of the "Neighborhood Circles" in Yonkers, New York discussed a tragic situation where an infant choked to death. They decided that training in CPR techniques and first aid in Spanish should be offered to Latina mothers, and approached the Red Cross to help with the idea. The Red Cross now provides the training, and the Neighborhood Circle participants help to recruit trainees.

Affecting policy at the neighborhood and community level.
There may be action ideas which can only be implemented by key decision-makers in the community. These may be changes to public services that can be made within a city department or public agency (for example, changing how the police department deploys or trains officers), or policy changes that can be made by elected officials (for example, raising the police budget to support a community policing program). There are a number of steps you can take to make policy changes more likely.

- Involve key decision-makers as early on in the process as possible; ask them to help in recruitment, suggest that they join a democratic small group, and ask them to attend the action forum.
- At the action forum, be sure that the policy recommendations are mentioned in the reports from the small groups; consider asking a decision-maker to respond to some of the suggestions.
- Consider forming a committee of participants who are willing to work with policymakers on the recommendation(s); provide the same kinds of assistance you would provide new action groups (see above).
- Consider bringing policymakers together with residents at a 'fishbowl' forum.
- Collect participant comments into a report which is distributed to decision-makers and the media; this can be a very straightforward document, listing major themes, comments from participants, and action ideas (as much as possible, the language in the report should be the participants' own words).

- Let reporters and other media professionals know about the policy recommendations.

Example: The Calvert County (Md.) Board of Education included $50,000 in its budget to fund a coordinator at a community education resource center to help students with homework, run health and wellness fairs for residents, and serve as a forum for other school and family programs. The idea for the center came from a district-wide democratic organizing effort on education and the “achievement gap” between white students and students of color.

Moving quickly to mobilize action efforts

Sometimes there is very little confusion about what needs to be done to improve a neighborhood. There may be a number of action ideas that residents have talked about informally for years, but which have never been implemented. Some of those ideas may have emerged from a previous democratic organizing effort or some other large-scale attempt to involve residents, and for one reason or another they 'didn't go anywhere.' (If so, carefully examine the previous organizing efforts to find out exactly why the discussions never led to action.)

There may also be a number of basic but important tasks which are not controversial or particularly difficult – removing graffiti, planting flowers, building a playground – but which no one has bothered to tackle. Some of the residents who might be willing to take on these tasks are not the kind of people who will ever come to a meeting to talk about neighborhood issues.

This section provides a plan for quickly mobilizing some action efforts. It includes some of the key principles embodied by democratic small-group discussions, but it moves participants more quickly into action planning or implementation. It could be used at the conclusion of a more dialogue-intensive democratic organizing effort. It could also be used before the launch of a more dialogue-intensive effort, in order to show residents that your project/organization is interested in action as well as talk.

1. **Recruit participants**. Remember that the more people you recruit, the more likely it is that action ideas will be implemented.

2. **Hold an *Action Forum*** (this could be a regularly scheduled meeting of a neighborhood association or some other neighborhood group – you will simply have recruited more people to attend it). Make sure that you've recruited key decision-makers and public employees or other people who work on some of the action ideas being discussed: police officers for crime-related ideas, educators for school-related ideas, etc.
   - Set up an 'immediate tasks' table underneath a list of all the basic tasks that need to be done (street clean-ups, tree planting, etc.). Encourage residents to sign up to work on one of the tasks, and also allow them to sign up their children, spouse, or parents.
   - Have a speaker welcome the crowd and briefly describe the main categories for the action ideas – NOT the action ideas themselves. For example, use categories like "crime prevention," "youth issues," or "land use," rather than specific ideas like "shut down the drug houses," "start a tutoring program," or "create an historic preservation district." The speaker(s) should also give the crowd a little inspiration ("Here's how we can tackle this problem and improve this neighborhood!"). *30 minutes*
   - Split the audience into small action groups according to the category that most interests them. If there are more than 12 people for one category, split it into smaller groups. Give each group a discussion handout that includes a few introductory questions and several of the main arguments or action ideas for that category. Ask for volunteers to facilitate each group. *60 minutes*
   - Provide food and some time at the end of the meeting for the participants to socialize.

3. **Action groups meet again in the subsequent weeks** (1-2 weeks after the ***Action Forum***) to work on their ideas. They can either set their own date, time, and location for

this meeting, or you can find a central location for all the groups. Provide the kinds of assistance to action groups described on p. 4 of this section.

4. **Hold a *Results Forum*** one month after the ***Action Forum*** (this could be a regularly scheduled neighborhood meeting). Recruit reporters or other media representatives (if they haven't been involved already).
   - Have each of the action groups give a brief report on their progress. If they have run into obstacles, ask the audience for ideas on how to get past them. *60 minutes*
   - Ask decision-makers present to briefly describe how the input gathered from the neighborhood had an impact (or why it did not have an impact) on policy decisions. *15-30 minutes*
   - If there are any major decisions facing the neighborhood, briefly describe the options and take a vote (either by secret ballot or a show of hands). *15-30 minutes*
   - Have a speaker thank everyone for participating, and challenge them to keep up the work.
   - Provide food and some time at the end of the meeting for the participants to socialize.

Title of project or action idea

	Steps	*Step Leader*	*Support Team*	*Resources Needed*	*Deadline*
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					

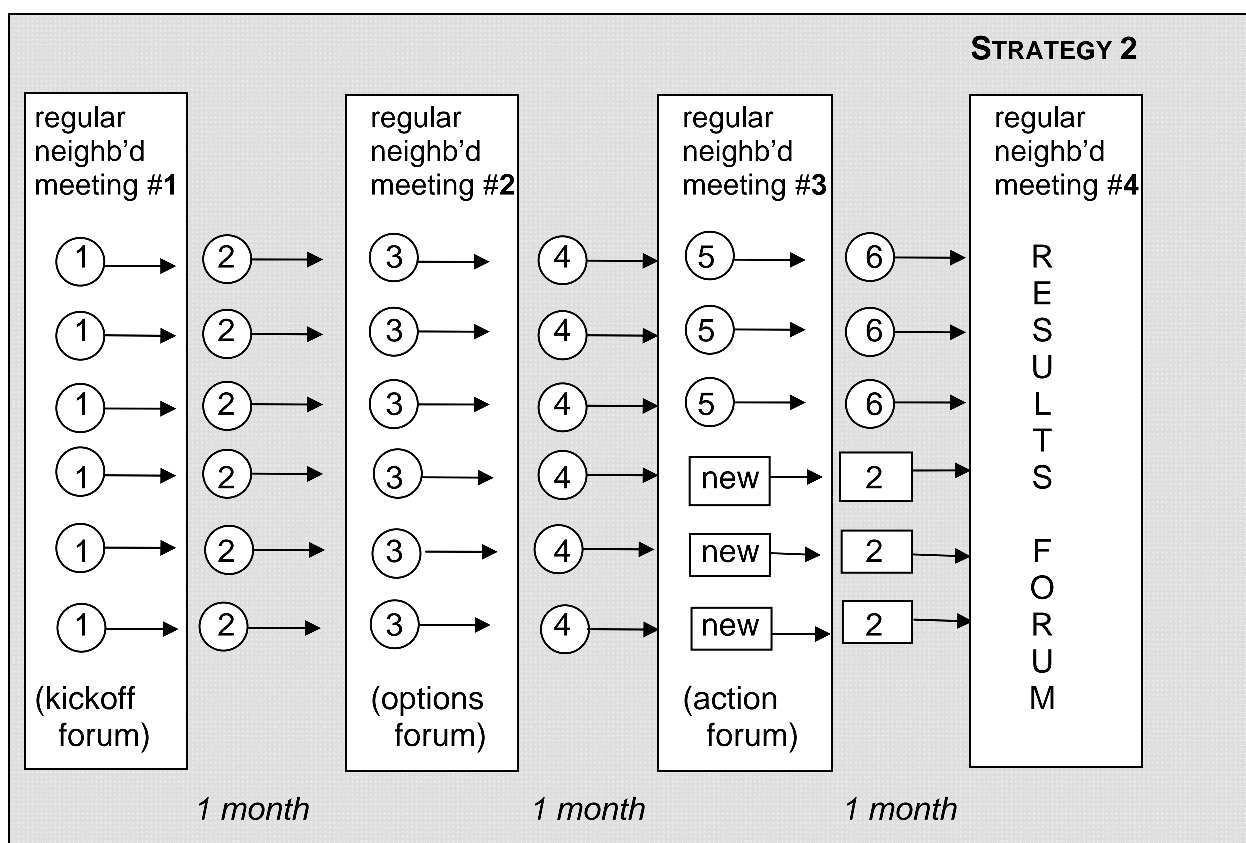
RETURNING TO THE TABLE
SUSTAINING INVOLVEMENT OVER TIME

Relying on an existing neighborhood group

Many neighborhoods have successful neighborhood associations, Community Development Corporations, or other grassroots groups. In others, the main challenge is how to revitalize a grassroots group that is not currently active or effective.

The following strategy is designed to help mobilize citizens by holding small-group discussions as part of the regular monthly meetings of a neighborhood association or other grassroots group. If the group is currently active and effective, this strategy will make the organizing work somewhat easier. If the group is not active, this strategy will help to revitalize the association by boosting its membership and generating a wave of resident-led action efforts.

The picture of this strategy might look something like this:



To implement this strategy, consider the following steps:

1. **Assemble a recruitment team**. Bring together a few key people who you think may help drive the project. Take 45 minutes with this group to try out the first few discussion questions you will be using in the project. Once people have had a taste of this democratic small-group meeting, you can begin planning the project in earnest. The group may find it valuable to:
   - Set goals for the project.
   - Create a map of the neighborhood's networks and assets.
   - Decide whether you have the right 'pitch' to describe the project: Why should people

take part in this?

2. **Recruit participants**. Use a neighborhood networks map to identify people and groups you might approach. Don't forget the people who serve the neighborhood but may not live there: police officers, teachers, social service providers, school administrators, business owners, historic preservation advocates, city planners, youth program directors, etc.

3. **Recruit and train facilitators**.

4. **Hold a *Kickoff Forum*.** This could actually be a regular monthly neighborhood meeting – you will simply have recruited more people to attend it by emphasizing the new opportunity they will have to address a critical issue.
   - Have a few speakers briefly give the audience the basic information they need to discuss the issue, along with some inspiration ("Here's how we can tackle this problem and improve this neighborhood!"). *30 minutes*
   - Pass out the discussion guides. Split the audience into groups of 8-10, striving for a diverse mix of participants in each group, and ask them to start on the ***Introduction session*** in the guide. *60-90 minutes*
   - Provide food and some time at the end of the meeting for the participants to socialize.

5. **Small groups meet a second time** (1-2 weeks after the ***Kickoff Forum***). They can either set their own date, time, and location for this meeting, or you can find a central location for all the groups. Each group will discuss the ***Options session*** in the guide. If people who couldn't attend the first forum still want to be involved in the project, or if people who did attend want to recruit other new participants – perhaps by bringing the guide back to their block club – new groups can form during this period and start on the ***Introduction session***.

6. **Hold an *Options Forum*** one month after the ***Kickoff Forum*** (again, this could be a regularly scheduled neighborhood meeting). Even if they didn't attend the first forum or any of the small-group sessions, try to make sure that the official 'decision-makers' on the issue attend this meeting.
   - Have each of the groups give a brief report on their conclusions so far. *30 minutes*
   - Split the audience back into their small groups for the ***Action session*** (last session in the guide), keeping the groups intact. Groups may want to meet again before the next forum to continue working on this session. People who haven't participated can form their own group and start on the ***Introduction session*** – they can meet again during the subsequent weeks to catch up with the rest. *60-90 minutes*
   - Provide food and some time at the end of the meeting for the participants to socialize.

7. **Hold an *Action Forum*** one month later (this could be a regularly scheduled neighborhood meeting). Make sure that you've recruited public employees or other people who work on some of the action ideas being generated by the groups; for example, if one group wants to mentor young people, you should try to have a youth program director or school administrator present (if there isn't one participating in the project already). Other allies who might help groups work on their action ideas: police officers, police lieutenants, teachers, social service providers, college professors, business owners, historic preservation advocates, city planners, etc.

- Set up an 'immediate tasks' table underneath a list of all the basic tasks that need to be done (street clean-ups, tree planting, etc.). Encourage residents to sign up to work on one of the tasks, and also allow them to sign up their children, spouse, or parents.
- Have each of the groups give a brief report on their action ideas. If the group is going to stay together to work on one of their action ideas, they should announce this to the whole audience. *30 minutes*
- Ask any decision-makers present to respond briefly to the ideas – emphasizing how people can work to help implement them. (Talk to decision-makers beforehand – if they are too defensive, or too negative about the possibility of implementing action ideas, eliminate this section of the agenda) *15-30 minutes, depending on number of speakers*
- Split the audience up again. Groups that want to work on an action idea can stay together. Form new action groups to work on other ideas: do this by assigning each action idea to an empty table and asking people who are interested in that idea to go to that table. Ask new allies to join the group they can help the most. *60 minutes*
- Provide food and some time at the end of the meeting for the participants to socialize.

8. **Action groups meet again in the subsequent weeks** (1-2 weeks after the ***Action Forum***) to work on their ideas. They can either set their own date, time, and location for this meeting, or you can find a central location for all the groups.

9. **Hold a *Results Forum*** one month after the ***Action Forum*** (this could be a regularly scheduled neighborhood meeting). Recruit reporters or other media representatives (if they haven't been involved already).
   - Have each of the action groups give a brief report on their progress. If they have run into obstacles, ask the audience for ideas on how to get past them. *60 minutes*
   - Ask decision-makers present to briefly describe how the input gathered from the neighborhood had an impact (or why it did not have an impact) on policy decisions. *15-30 minutes*
   - If there are any major decisions facing the neighborhood, briefly describe the options and take a vote (either by secret ballot or a show of hands). *15-30 minutes*
   - Have a speaker thank everyone for participating, and challenge them to keep up the work.
   - Provide food and some time at the end of the meeting for the participants to socialize.

In subsequent neighborhood meetings, give more opportunities for the action groups to report on their progress. Give decision-makers opportunities to describe how the input gathered from the neighborhood had an impact (or why it did not have an impact) on policy decisions.

10. **Go back to Step 1.**

Changing how a neighborhood group operates

Applying democratic principles in a short-term organizing effort will not lead to long-term success for a neighborhood association if the group goes back to the same undemocratic habits it had before. The people who joined up because they were given a unique chance to be heard, to form relationships, and to take action will quickly realize that the association has returned to the same old “politics as usual.”

Even if the leaders of an association want to do things differently, it is not always clear how to go about it. People often wonder: How can we apply these same principles to the way our neighborhood functions over the long term?

There are at least seven ways to apply democratic principles to neighborhood institutions. The following list is not a sequence of steps to follow – an association could work on one aspect of the association at a time. But it is probably not as effective to work on only one or two areas: leaders should consider changes in most, if not all, of these areas:

Rebuilding the board or steering committee. You want a team that is energetic, committed, and representative of the neighborhood. Use a neighborhood networks map to decide whether your board represents the major networks in the community. You also want the group to work together effectively. Apply some of the democratic small-group principles:

- Limit the meetings to no more than twelve people (if the board or committee is larger than this, find ways to break it up into smaller segments).
- Use an impartial facilitator (this could be a responsibility that rotates among all the team members, or among several who have the best facilitation skills).
- Establish ground rules that the group revisits periodically.

Rethinking the staffing, funding, and bylaws of the association.

- Is the staffing (paid, volunteer, or both) sufficient for what the group is trying to do?
- How much time is spent in involving residents or supporting resident-led action efforts?
- Are the by-laws flexible enough to allow the association to operate effectively?

Example: In order to launch a short-term organizing effort, the West Broadway Neighborhood Association enlisted an AmeriCorps volunteer who worked for the organization for a six-month period.

Rethinking the format, timing, and location of meetings. There are two main questions here: “Are the association’s regular meetings participatory, enjoyable, and effective?,” and “Do the meetings provide people a range of incentives to participate?” Improving the meetings may involve:

- Spending the majority of the time in small, facilitated groups.
- Finding new ways to provide information (written or verbal) that gives participants the background on key topics, and/or describes the main options facing the neighborhood in a concise and balanced way.
- Reconciling the need for a constant meeting location and time with the desire to reach out to larger numbers of people (see “Reaching out,” below).

Giving people a range of incentives to participate may include:

- Providing food, and time for socializing at the beginning or end of the meeting.
- Providing child care.
- Highlighting young people – all kinds of people will take part in something if it involves

watching kids (and not just their own kids) dance, sing, act, receive awards, display their artwork, etc.

- Piggybacking on other meetings and events – this could include bingo nights, high school sporting events, etc.

Example: The Village Foundation in Southwest Delray Beach, Florida, has used monthly neighborhood parties called “Flava Fridays” as a lead-in to its regular meetings. The group has also capitalized on the appeal of young people by beginning some of their events with performances by the Delray Divas, a dance performance group for girls and young women (ages 6-18). The Divas program was itself dramatically strengthened by the first democratic organizing effort held in Delray Beach – the fledgling project gained many new volunteers, and added a youth mentoring component for the 100+ girls and young women who participate.

Reaching out to the block level. Block clubs and similar kinds of extremely grassroots groups are used in many communities to reach large numbers of ordinary citizens. These groups can provide a very accessible first step for involvement. The key challenges seem to be:

- Recruiting block club leaders.
- Connecting the block club to neighborhood-wide institutions so that there is two-way communication between the levels.

Example: The United Neighborhoods Center in Buffalo has encouraged and linked block clubs in the city by establishing a web-site, listservs, a free computer center, and free classes to help people use computers and the Internet.

Reaching up to the city level. All kinds of city-level entities can benefit from effective neighborhood associations. This includes governmental bodies like police departments, mayor’s offices, city councils, school systems, zoning boards, other departments in city government, and state or federal agencies; it also includes private and nonprofit groups like small business associations, Chambers of Commerce, charities, foundations, community development corporations, etc. Establishing stronger connections with these kinds of groups can heighten the impact of the neighborhood, enhance your ability to recruit citizens, and help sustain your association. Think about:

- How can/does your association help the city-level group achieve its goals?
- What can your neighborhood provide them (volunteer time? quality input?) that will help them further?
- How can they further legitimize your association? Formally asking residents for input on a particular question? Working more closely with citizen-led action efforts? Sending mid-level staffers (i.e. police lieutenants and inspectors rather than beat officers) to neighborhood meetings?
- How can you help residents work together more closely with employees and representatives of city-level groups?

Example: Residents of Southwest Delray Beach, Florida, found out that their city’s planning department was preparing for the redevelopment of West Atlantic Avenue, a major thoroughfare running through the neighborhood. The Village Foundation, a grassroots group that had initiated a successful democratic organizing effort in that neighborhood, reached out to the planning department. They argued that neighborhood residents deserved the chance to give input on the redevelopment plan, and that the plan would be more likely to succeed if residents had ‘bought in’ to the changes. The city planners agreed to hold a charrette (a one-day planning workshop) in Southwest Delray. To their surprise, over 100 people turned out for the event, and gave a great deal of enthusiastic, informed, detailed input on the redevelopment plan.

Using ranks, rituals, and recognition. A key to sustaining people's involvement is conveying a sense of political status or legitimacy – the idea that everyone has public privileges and responsibilities that can't be taken away. All good democratic organizing efforts communicate the sense that citizens have a place on the place on the public stage; but there are also specific ways to reinforce it:

- Giving residents particular titles or designations that confer their status and responsibilities.
- Using ceremonies to welcome new residents or celebrate new graduates.
- Establishing an awards program to recognize people and groups who have contributed to the neighborhood in some way.

Example: To launch a large-scale democratic organizing effort, the Charlotte/Mecklenburg Education Foundation named 100 residents as "Delegates" to the community, and asked each to recruit citizens to take part in the project.

Example: The town of North Olmsted, Ohio, holds an annual ceremony where the residents who have become U.S. citizens in the past year are honored and officially welcomed.

Recruiting more broadly. Launching a short-term organizing effort is one way of reaching a much larger set of residents. But associations can also use the same principles as part of their ongoing work, rather than in one big burst.

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Glossary

Action
In the context of democratic governance, action means any effort made by the participants to improve their neighborhood or community, from minor individual acts to major projects and policy changes.

Action forum
A large event held at the conclusion of a round of a democratic organizing effort. At the action forum, organizers typically highlight the work of participants who have already begun their action projects, give participants and public officials alike the chance to sign up for new action committees, and congratulate everyone on their efforts so far.

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)
An approach to community building that focuses on the positive attributes of a community and its members rather than on the negatives or needs.

Community building
Process that increases the collective capacity of people in neighborhoods to improve the quality of life for the individuals who live and work in that community.

Community development
Process designed to create conditions of economic and social prosperity for the whole community with its active participation and the fullest possible reliance on the community's initiative.

Democratic governance
The art of governing communities in more participatory, deliberative, collaborative ways.

Discussion guide
Written material that gives the facilitator and participants a flexible structure for their discussions. The guide helps spark the conversation while keeping it even-handed. By listing different views about an issue, the guide helps the group consider ideas that they may have discounted before. In addition to encouraging people to share personal experiences, it makes room for storytelling, brainstorming, and other ways of getting at the ideas and concerns that motivate them.

Facilitator
The facilitator is someone who will remain neutral and will serve the discussion. It is the facilitator's job to get the group started, help the participants set and keep ground rules, help them handle any conflicts that may arise, and help them manage the guide.

Ground rules
In a study circle, ground rules are rules adopted by the participants to help their discussion go smoothly. Ground rules can be amended at any point during the sessions.

Kickoff
Any kind of large-group event intended to launch a round of small-group meetings by showing the number and diversity of organizations and people involved in the effort. A kickoff may also

generate publicity, give potential participants a taste of the process through a sample session, and allow participants time to socialize.

Organizing coalition
Coalition, steering committee, and working group are all terms that have been used by democratic organizers to describe the set of people and organizations working to organize the project.

Site
A place where a small-group meeting is held. Usually a public room rather than a private home.

Study circle
A group of 8-to-12 people from different backgrounds and viewpoints who meet several times in a facilitated discussion to talk about an issue, share concerns, and look for ways to make things better.

Technical assistance
Includes training, training materials, information exchange, and other forms of assistance provided by an agency or organization to promote self-sufficiency and efficiency in the endeavors of an organization, project, or business.