
Strengthening Communities

A Series of Community Development Skills Guides

- ▷ Discovering Why Are We Here
- ▷ Living Our Values
- ▷ Thinking Creatively
- ▶ **Making Choices**
- ▷ Building Community Alliances
- ▷ Planning and Facilitating



Making Choices

A guide to help groups get better at making decisions

A SPARC of BC Publication

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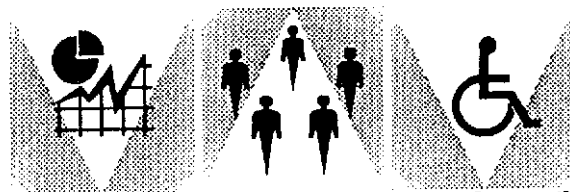
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**Social Planning and Research Council
of British Columbia**

SPARC of B.C. is a provincial voluntary association which conducts research and planning and provides public information and education to help people cooperatively plan for the social well being of their communities. For this Guide series, SPARC has drawn from its more than 25 years of experience with community work.

To order more copies of this guide or others in the series, contact:

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Before you begin...

What binds your group together?

How We Define Community

We don't. People do that themselves in the many ways they create communities — by getting to know neighbours, sharing common interests, joining different clubs and associations, taking classes, making friends at work, maintaining strong ties to extended families, and joining with one another to address an issue.

Can you describe your community development process?

How We See Community Development (CD)

Community development involves community people taking democratic control by participating in planning, bottom-up decision making, and community action. The process and outcomes of community development reflect common values, conflict and compromise, and the shifting of power to the community.

Have you talked about the values that guide your CD process?

Some Community Development Ground Rules

Community development is a way of working together based on shared concerns and respect for one another. Its values — equality, caring and sharing, social justice — guide what we do and how we do it.

Being welcoming (inclusive, open to others, friendly), sharing resources in an equitable (fair) way, being willing to compromise or reach consensus, basing decision-making in the community, and involving the public are all part of the community development process.

Do you take the time to think about the way you are doing your community development work, and why?

Learn While Doing

Community development involves action (doing), reflection (thinking about, talking about, and understanding what your group is doing) and action (doing it again but doing it better, with more understanding), and so on...

Opportunities for improving skills are often found during times of reflection.

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A word about using the Guide...

Plan your learning activity the way your group learns best. Some groups may just want to talk informally about the ideas in the Guide. Others may want to proceed in a more structured way. The *Planning and Facilitating Guide* has lots of useful ideas to help you plan.

The Guides are set up so that you can easily work through them in a logical and meaningful manner, simply following through the Guides section by section. It is probably a good idea to give everyone a copy of the Guide you are working with.

- ▶ Begin by sharing and comparing each others' experience and understanding of the topic. (*Other people's stories.*) Are there any common themes? What are the differences and similarities?
- ▶ Next, look at some of the theory. (*Why is this important?, Something to think about, It's tougher than you think.*) What do others say about this topic? How does this compare with what the group has already discussed? Does this change your thinking?
- ▶ Try a couple of the exercises. (*Getting down to work.*) You will find an exercise to correspond to each of the main ideas in the Guide. Use examples from your own community development activity to put what you've learned into practice.

You can also consult the Guides for ideas or activities as you work through a community development activity.

Tips...

- ▶ *These are your key to quick skill ideas*

Introduction

Community groups are always having to make choices — What are the most important community issues to be worked on? Who should be included in decision-making? Who do we include when we can't include everyone? How should scarce resources be spent? What are our goals? What are our priorities? Which solutions should we choose? Making choices, or decision making, is about how a group chooses from among the options before them.

Groups can make decisions — by intuition, by numbers or by consensus (and a multitude of variations or combinations of these). One of the first tasks people have when they agree to work together is to talk about how they are going to make decisions. Groups that are not clear on this will find their decision making is awkward and slow. Time, money, the issue, and belief systems will influence the way your group makes choices.

Main ideas in the guide

- ▶ Casting a wide net
- ▶ Mixing and matching methods
- ▶ Being open to change

Ask yourselves...

- ▶ How did your group decide how they were going to make decisions?
- ▶ Can your group move easily between two or three different ways of making decisions?
- ▶ Do you seek other people's opinions?
- ▶ When is the last time you changed your mind?

These questions are explored in this guide.

Other people's stories

People in one community are part of a movement to restore the sockeye salmon run to their local river. Through hard work and stubborn determination, community people are becoming knowledgeable "experts" on the issues they face in making a difference in their environment. The process started with a committee of local government, but the planning group soon expanded into a "watershed roundtable," a local or regional body for multi-party decision-making.

The process was guided by the belief that everyone had something helpful to contribute, drawing from their own skills and interests. This meant that there was no fixed membership to the group, and no fixed time table for taking part. People could participate as they were able. Several strategies were and are key to this successful community development process. Among these is a thoughtful decision-making strategy that this group calls "consensus-based planning."

They have used this definition to guide their process: Consensus is defined as general agreement or harmony. There are two types of consensus. One is a form of compromise in which the participants see the common elements in their multiple views. The second type is a form of collective creativity in which the individuals look for diversity of values, ideas and experiences as sources of learning from which they create areas of agreement larger than any one of their original. This type of decision-making called "opening up" builds from the idea that each point of view is a unique perspective on a given issue.

The group continually strives towards making decisions using the second type but readily admits that they move back and forth between the two as the time, level of agreement, and issues dictates. In rare instances, when consensus cannot be reached, they rely on majority rule.

Consensus based planning is based on three successive levels of consensus or shared understanding:

- 1) listening with respect until all have a common "sense" of what is being talked about
- 2) making decisions together (Yes, we have decided this, this is our best wisdom on the subject)
- 3) members of the group taking action together based on decisions they have made.

What has made consensus decision-making work for this group is the time they spent initially getting to know one another, understanding one another and listening to one another. That fostered a willingness to listen with respect and to respectfully acknowledge one another's point of view. Once all participants have expressed their points of view, the group begins looking for solutions that will encompass the whole group.

Why is this important?

There are many reasons for developing the skills for making quality choices. These include

- ▶ being able to choose wisely between a number of options which may seem equally valid
- ▶ making decisions systematically and quickly
- ▶ making sure all group members feel comfortable with how decisions are made
- ▶ gaining a reputation in your community as a good decision maker

Something to think about

As many people as possible should be involved in decision making.

Casting a wide net

Too often, too few people are included in decision making because of organizational, financial or time pressures. Groups will need to be resourceful, creative, and committed to casting a wide net when deciding who will be involved in making choices. It is a good idea to include more people rather than fewer. The same questions need to be asked again and again: Have we included the people most affected by the issue? Who is not here who should be here?



Tip on...checking for agreement

If decision making is a painful process, maybe the group hasn't agreed on how to make choices. Check it out! Stop and ask each other about the ways you like to make decisions. Is there agreement? Do you need to change the way you are doing things?

Groups can use a number of different ways to make decisions.

Mixing and matching

Decision making can be simple or complex. Some decisions are simply based on a good hunch. Others are made slowly and deliberately by consensus after hearing from each group member. And of course there are the traditional methods of voting, ranking, rating and the like.

More and more, groups use a combination of these methods. The more skill a group develops, the more easily they will be able to move from approach to approach, choosing the most suitable one for each situation.

Keep in mind that in community development practice, everyone needs to have a voice in and feel a part of the decision making process. Making sure the group takes ownership of its decision is also a critical part of making good choices.



It is never too late to change your mind.

Being open to change

The most any group can do is make the best decision they can at a given time. This means decisions should not be "cast in stone". It is a good idea to revisit your decisions from time to time and be open to changing when your original choice no longer makes sense. In the words of a contemporary politician "only fools will not change their mind".



Tip on...respecting tradition

Many cultures have traditional ways of making decisions, like consulting with elders. Be sensitive to these traditions!

It's tougher than you think

Learning new decision making skills is like improving your swimming stroke. It may feel awkward at first, but with practice, you reach the end of the pool with less resistance and more speed. Groups need to be encouraged to work through the awkward stage, even if at first it feels more like going backward than ahead.

Including more people in decision making is time consuming.

It is a challenge to balance different personalities in a group. There will be those who seek quick efficient ways of making make decisions, and there will be others committed to an inclusive consensus approach.

Getting down to work

This section contains some straight-forward exercises to get you started. These exercises can take as little as an hour or as long as a day to complete. Use your own community development project to make the work more practical. Choose the exercises which are best for your group and issue (the *Planning and Facilitating Guide* gives tips on how to plan these activities).

Most of the exercises are highly participatory — one of the best ways to learn about community development.

An exercise for *casting a wide net*

Are we missing anyone?

What is it?

A simple exercise to get groups started in identifying everyone that should be included in the decision making process.

Why use it?

This exercise can be used to start groups realizing that many people should be involved in decision making.

How is it done?

A good first step in any decision is to ask the same questions over and over.

Remember to ask:

- ▶ Who is affected by this decision?
- ▶ Have we included those most affected by the decision?
- ▶ Who is not here who should be here?
- ▶ How can we reach those most affected by these decisions?

Exercises for *mixing and matching*

Choosing by intuition

Sharing your best hunch

What is it?

Yes, it's true. There is a place for intuition in decision making.

Why use it?

People may base hunches on their past experience with the issue, their knowledge of the issue (and of people involved in the issue) or simply a strong feeling about something. Sometimes groups may feel okay about making a choice based on intuition. More often than not, however, hunches are used in combination with other methods when making choices.

How is it done?

Ask people to sit back and think quietly for five or ten minutes to get in touch with what Jiminy Cricket calls "your small still voice". When the group is ready, ask them to share their thoughts.

Did anyone have a strong sense what the right decision might be? How do the hunches of different group members compare? Does anyone feel strongly enough about their hunch to follow it up?

Remember, hunches come to people at any time of the day or night. You can call for hunches at any time.

Choosing by numbers

All strategies in this category are based on the same idea — choices are best made by numbers. That is, either through voting, ranking or rating, choices can be made using somewhat scientific and democratic (the majority rules) procedures. Here are a couple of examples.

Voting

What is it?

Voting is a widely used and generally accepted technique for making choices. It is simple and quick. It provides groups with instant results so that they can move on to the next step in their process.

Why use it?

For most people, voting is a familiar way of making decisions.

How is it done?

The group chooses the option which gets the most votes. Sometimes, if the issue is especially sensitive or involves large numbers of people, voting by secret ballot may be in order. Some groups insist that more than half (at least 51%) must agree on a choice. Votes are usually taken by a show of hands or a verbal "agreed".

Ranking and rating

What is it?

Both ranking and rating use numbers to indicate the value of a given option.

Why use it?

Ranking and rating allow groups to determine the relative importance of a number of options. It is particularly useful for small groups when a clear yes or no decision can not be made. (More sophisticated methods are available for making choices in very large groups.)

How is it done?

List all your options on a chalk/white board or a flip chart.

Ask each group member to rank the options in order of their importance for them.

If there are eight options rank them from 1 to 8 (where 8 is the most important and 1 is the least important).

Once the group has finished, go through the options one by one.

Ask what value the group places on each option and record it.

Add up the points assigned to each option. If there were eight people in your group the results may look like this:

Illustration: Ranking and Rating

	<i>Rankings from the group</i>	<i>Total</i>
building a youth centre	1, 6, 7, 3, 7, 8,	32
using the existing town hall	2, 8, 10, 1, 5, 6	31
doing nothing	2, 1, 3, 1, 2, 1	10

Meeting your objective

What is it?

In this exercise groups make choices based on how well each alternative meets the objectives or outcomes that the group is working towards.

Why use it?

This exercise allows groups to compare the relative merits of a number of options rather than forcing them into a yes/no decision.

How is it done?

If you have not already done so, list what it is you want to achieve or the objectives that you are working towards (a place for youth to call their own, a positive environment for youth, etc.).

List your objectives across the top of a large sheet of paper.

List your option(s) down the left side of the same page.

For each option, ask each other, "Does this option meet this objective? If it does, place a check next to it.

Tally up each horizontal column (the line for each option) to see which option received the most checks and fulfilled the most objectives.

Illustration: Meeting your objective

Options	Objectives			
	To increase salmon stocks	To clean up the riverbed	To improve water quality	To provide local employment
education about importance of our rivers	✓	✓	✓	
enforce environmental regulations	✓	✓	✓	
community involvement in restoration & clean-up	✓	✓	✓	✓
do nothing				

Predicting your results

What is it?

This exercise helps groups choose from a number of alternatives on the basis of their possible outcomes. What would our community organization/activity be like if we choose A? B? C?

Why use it?

Too often groups make choices without really thinking about their consequences. Clearly we can not predict all results, but taking the time to really think our ideas through can tell us a great deal. Often groups choose the options with the most desirable options, but it is also worth taking a closer look at those that are least desirable. Sometimes the least desirable options are not "bad", just different.

How is it done?

Form two columns on flip chart paper. On the left side write "best" and the right side write "worst". Ask the group to imagine, describe, and list both the "best" and "worst" scenarios for each option. (Also known as benefits and risks.)

Once you have completed this exercise, ask the group for feedback.

Stickers

What is it?

With this exercise groups use stickers (usually three) to indicate their top priorities.

Why use it?

This is a simple, quick visual method to help groups to choose among priorities. It works well in large groups.

How is it done?

List all your choices on a sheet of paper.
Give each participant three stickers.

Invite each participant to place one sticker beside each of their three top choices.

The option with the most stickers is a top priority.

Choosing by consensus

Trying for complete agreement

What is it?

Decision making by consensus seeks agreement from all group members. In fact, when groups are using a pure consensus approach they will not proceed until everyone in the group agrees with the decision. In other instances groups will use a consensus approach in combination with others, like voting or ranking and rating.

Why use it?

The consensus approach builds strong personal commitment. It allows people willing to work together to come up with decisions that are shared and supported by all the members of the group. Keep in mind that consensus building takes time and personal commitment from all group members.

How is it done?

The decision to be made is presented to the group.

Have the person presenting the issue explain it and suggest different views, possibilities, and options for responding.

Invite everyone to give a response by giving each person a chance to speak in turn (this is sometimes called rounds or a round table).

Summarize all comments highlighting areas of agreement and disagreement.

Give the group a chance to respond to the summary. Did it actually reflect what the group had said?

If there is not agreement, start another round. This time the process is a bit more formal.

Give each person a chance to comment. The speaker is not interrupted except for questions of clarification. Agree on an equal amount of time for each person to speak and time the round accurately. At the end of the round summarize what has been said testing to see if the group has reached agreement. If not, try again.

In the following rounds you can use both formal and informal processes. During informal rounds, try using some creative thinking techniques to bring some freshness to the discussion. Formal rounds should be used to focus attention clearly on the alternatives.

When the group is in total agreement, the decision is recorded.

For more information

The Universal Traveller: A Soft-System Guide to Creativity, Problem Solving and the Process of Reaching Goals. Koberg, D. and Bagnall, J. Los Altos: Crisp Publications, 1991.

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Group Techniques for Planning: A Guide to Nominal Group and Delphi Process. Delbecq, A., Ven de Ven, A. and Gustafson, D. Middleton: Green Briar Press, 1975.

The Series

Use the Guides...

...to direct an activity

...to get back on track

...when all else fails!

Discovering Why We Are Here

Help your group figure out what it is about, and why.

Living Our Values

Help your group be clear about what is near and dear to its heart. It will make working together a lot easier and a lot more effective.

Thinking Creatively

Help your group put its creative energy to work.

Making Choices

Ideas are a dime a dozen. Help your group sort through the list and choose what is best for your own work.

Building Community Alliances

Help your group figure out who else to work with and why.

Planning and Facilitating: A Guide to Help Use the *Strengthening Communities Series*

For the old hand and the faint of heart! A step-by-step guide to facilitating groups the CD way.

Although each booklet stands on its own, most will find that the booklets *Discovering Why We Are Here* and *Living Our Values* are a good place to start.

Apart from that, the choice is yours!