

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

Most often, environmental and conservation organizations need to create vital and long-lived groups in order to address a community's needs. Usually, the efforts to monitor and improve water quality, protect wild lands, build an environmental education program, protect community land resources or create economic viability for a community, etc., take much longer than two or three years. To have a true successful impact and then to maintain what has been achieved, won or created, these efforts require groups and organizations that can sustain work over 10 to 40 years.

What does it take for environmental, conservation, and community groups to create organizations that can truly sustain themselves and their critical work for the long haul? How can current volunteer and staff leaders modify and structure their work so that future leaders will have a dynamic and stable organization? What types of policies, operating standards, practical guidelines and processes enable groups to adapt and change within the needs and context of their community issues and goals?

The following "ingredients" outline key factors for organizational leaders to consider as they grapple with their quest in seeking to create sustainable organizations.

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

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

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

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

### **INGREDIENT # 3: DIVERSE AND CONTINUOUS FUNDRAISING**

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

### **INGREDIENT # 4: CLEAR AND ACCURATE FINANCIAL CONTROL**

Clear and accurate financial management provides the needed management tools to make decisions and to plan for the future. The Board of Directors (or the key Steering Committee in an all volunteer project) and typically the Executive Director have the responsibility to create and manage the following elements of a good financial system: 1) complete and conservative annual budget ; 2) correct accounting records; 3) timely financial reports (monthly); 4) financial reports in understandable form; 5) projections and budget revisions when needed; 6) compliance with all government reporting; 7) checks-and-balances, e.g. cash management and check signing; 8) adequate insurance coverage; 9) investment management; and 10) adequate, secure filing system.

### **INGREDIENT # 5: STRONG AND EFFECTIVE GOVERNING BODY**

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

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

The "people resources" of an organization consist of the board, volunteers and staff. Regardless of whether an organization has staff or not, it must have key leaders, active volunteers at all levels, and a way to develop people throughout these different levels. Leaders and volunteers should represent the diversity and strength of the membership and/or constituencies it works with. All participants should feel welcome.

Opportunities at all levels of participation are important: from first time volunteers at an event to working committees, from getting a mailing out to speaking at a public hearing, and from participation in an event to serving on the board for the first time.

Ideally, an organization will harness an individual's interest in and commitment to the organization's mission, and then match the individual's availability with the work that needs to be done. This will include cultivating and training board members, staff and volunteers and giving them more opportunities to take on new leadership.

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

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

Strong partnerships with a broad base of other networks help to build visibility for the organization in the community and to facilitate the way for implementation of action and projects. The type and amount of networking and collaboration will vary with each organization and type of project. Collaborations can include business associates, community groups, schools, foundations, donors, benefactors, residents, professional agencies, government decision-makers, and many other stakeholders.

Organizations also need to let the community know what they are doing and that others are welcome in every stage of a project. An important component of visibility is the cultivation of media coverage. In addition to media coverage, organizations have a large variety of tools to get their message across. Examples include: holding special events, posters, fundraising, active websites, staffing a booth at a local fair, annual trade show or at the library, and presenting the results of a program to other groups. Every contact is important so don't forget the power of "word of mouth" as volunteers talk with friends and family. Keep volunteers well informed via newsletters, timely notes, meetings, and one to one conversations about events and issues.

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

Effective organizations have technology that makes work easier, more efficient and effective, especially in the communications area. Historically, nonprofits have tried to make up in labor what they have lacked in technology. But times are changing with new volunteer expertise, staff time and sustainable energy becoming scarce. Technology that's appropriate and used well can maximize our time. Modern computer hardware, software and web, networking and email access for leaders, members and staff is a must these days. Also, adequate phone lines and systems, cars that run well, office space and comfortable furniture that don't compromise workers' health and safety and are conducive to both individual and collective work, adding to worker and organizational well-being, productivity and more achievements.

Sustainable organizations are not acquiring every new “bell and whistle” that becomes available, but continually assess the effectiveness of their current technology and are evaluating what new additions would increase their effectiveness. They make certain that each piece of technology is affordable, productive, supporting and actually serving the work of the organization, not creating a log jam or hindering success.

### **INGREDIENT #9: COMMUNICATION AND FEEDBACK WITHIN AN OPEN AND DEMOCRATIC "LEARNING ENVIRONMENT"**

In our natural biological systems, adaptation cannot occur without feedback loops. Sustainable organizations can model this biological wisdom by consistently creating opportunities for learning and change to occur. Practices such as written and verbal evaluation of meetings, training programs, periodic program review, and annual work performance evaluations provide ongoing feedback and continuous learning loops. By regularly, democratically and openly asking "How are we doing?" organizations create a strong team culture where previous actions are not "mistakes" or "wrong," but instead are an opportunity to learn how to do better for the next project or next step.

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

A culture where major and minor victories are celebrated and all members, leaders and staff feel valued and appreciated is critical to long term sustainability. Board members, agency staff and all volunteers especially need to feel they are spending their free time in a place that's generally creative, fun and life supporting. Music, celebration, food, thank you messages (oral & written) and affirmations hold organizations together and help to counter the long-haul struggle of creating a safe and healthy environment for all. Recognition and support for effort and results are essential every day.

Guidebook Extract from the Institute for Conservation Leadership (ICL)