

(To return to Village press the 'Back' button in your internet browser)

Step 1 – Describing the Activity

Step one of organizing an activity in Village provides the opportunity for a group or an individual to begin an activity description as a reference point for all other input. Six basic description fields are provided so a description can be easily provided and accessed by whoever is interested in that activity. ¹

Individual Descriptions

Where an individual or a small minority completes the step one description prior to seeking cooperation from anyone their idea description becomes the reference point for inviting cooperation. Other people are invited to cooperate when and if they feel they can 'embrace' that description or negotiate mutually acceptable change by using the comment options in each of the six description fields. Far from being a leader, an initiator of an idea can rely on the description itself to provide direction. In fact, if the initiator started moving in a different direction to the description they used to invite others, it is them that would have to negotiate change or leave. This process lets people know exactly what they are investing their time and energy in from the outset.

This approach ensures that any individual has a way to develop an idea and use it to draw cooperation without that idea becoming railroaded by more dominant people in a majority rule situation or watered down by what Harvey (1988) called the Abilene paradox or 'group think', ² that can occur in consensus processes.³ This process begins to overcome one of the downsides of the modernist management paradigm, where the majority silences the minority (Wynn and Guditus, 1984; Lannello, 1992; Ostroff, 1999).

Group Descriptions

Sometimes it will be a group, as opposed to an individual, who initially enters a description. In this situation wrong assumptions can quickly be identified and the group can:

1. see that they all have the same basic activity concept and continue together,
2. see that they have different concepts and proceed separately (perhaps in smaller groups), or

3. they can identify common ground and negotiate difference.

Regardless of which way a group proceeds, the simple fact that assumptions have been acknowledged and registered in Village so early up drastically reduces the chances of misunderstanding and misdirected investment of time. Bill Metcalf's (1995) study with ten long standing Australian intentional communities demonstrated that one of the greatest sources of conflict and disillusionment is the investment of time that people make on false assumptions.

Whether it is a group or an individual that establishes the step one description, that vision becomes a transparent reference point for all group decisions and shared authority. In effect, step one has established a constitution for the group activity.

A platform for dissent

Where any disagreement may be apparent Village recommends, in the tradition of cooperative processes (Dressler, 2006 & Saint and Lawson, 1994), that dissenters are given the floor to voice their points. The online comment option, which allows a comments in each of the six fields given to describe the activity, can be very helpful here.

Step 2 – Listing the Jobs

Villages online activity description and comment option for reaching agreement both represent important innovations to traditional cooperative processes but in step two a whole new cooperative innovation unfolds that moves from the way groups come to agreements to the way they put those agreements into action.

Once decisions are made, cooperative or not, the way of operating for most self-help groups typically defaults back to specialised roles and hierarchical management methods. (Saint and Lawson, 1994; Butcher, Collis, Glen and Sills, 1980). While this approach works for many self-help groups, Burns, Williams and Windebank (2004) point out that self-help groups are typically unskilled or broad skilled as opposed to specialised, collaborative as opposed to hierarchical and voluntary as opposed to paid. Because of this, depending on specialised and hierarchical modes of operating has led to themes of leadership burnout, power struggles and conflict, longwinded meetings, bad

practice, lack of skills, domination by some and lack of participation (McCluskey, 1999; Metcalf, 1995; Thompson, Bartolomei, Corkery and Judd, 2003).

Step two of the Village process begins the development of a 'cooperative mode of operation'. In step two the first 'List Jobs' page allows for a brainstorm to name the jobs involved in the activity⁴. Like the description, these jobs are recorded on this page for all to see. Each job has a comment option so, once again, the jobs can be discussed and agreed upon. People can list as many jobs as they like and file these jobs under a job heading (shopping, cooking etc. may come under the heading 'food')

Step 3 – The Planner

When jobs are agreed upon they are given a date which automatically add them to a planner. Here everyone can easily:

- Decide and see WHAT needs to be done, WHEN and HOW
- Easily add, agree on and share tasks without meetings
- Avoid one person needing to know it all, avoid having a 'leader', avoid group collapse on burn out
- Overcome tension between the need for structure and the often casual nature of community participation
- Break tasks down to manageable sizes making participation far more accessible to unskilled participants ⁴
- Assert community 'ownership' of local knowledge and skill development (NTW, 2008)

Far from the self-help 'leader' who has the viability of the activity organised in their head, this model of organisation dispersed roles, breaks them down into small non-specialised jobs, records all jobs for all to see. In effect this approach automatically records and gives everyone access to the grand plan.

Despite all the theory embedded in Village, step one of putting forward and negotiating a description and step two of brainstorming and negotiating a jobs list are pretty straight forward, intuitive and simple steps. The product is a clear agreement as a foundation for an activity and a very practical cooperative organizational planner. This

would seem like a good example of the sort of community empowerment structure academics like Kenny (1999) and Campfrens (1997) refer to the need for.

Foot notes _____

1. If it was a party being organised it may be that it is described as a 'family event', that it will be held in a 'community hall', that it will happen on the 'first Saturday of July' and that it will be a 'cooperatively organised'.

2. Abilene paradox or 'group think' is where a group can unanimously agree on a course of action that no individual member of the group desires because no one individual is willing to go against the perceived group will (Harvey, 1988).

3. In this way Village asserts a space for individual idea development. When push comes to shove, in consensus or majority rule processes, the majority view tends to dominate the minority. This need not be the case where a description provides a basis for minorities to locate common interest with others and that description becomes a shared authority. It allows an activity to begin on what has been agreed and establishes the ethic of discussion and agreement.

4. The step two brainstorm is guided by the description that has been reached in step one.

5. Instead of a specialised role like a treasurer, several smaller tasks like collecting receipts etc. which anyone can take on will be developed. This can help participants share and learn new roles in empowering ways. This asserts community 'ownership' of local knowledge and skill development which is crucial to community development (Campfrens, 1997).

(To return to Village press the 'Back' button in your internet browser)