

Getting Off to a Strong Start

Your organization is ready to roll; your officers are excited about beginning their term and eager to contribute. But wait! ... There are two important steps to take before your plunge into the year's activities – building your group into a team, and determining your goals for the year. Team Building is the process of forming diverse individuals into a cohesive team, a group that has several things in common.

- ❖ Agreement on a common version of what the group is working toward (goals)
- ❖ Agreement on what they are able to accomplish as a group (objectives)
- ❖ Agreement on the specific roles in which each person will work to accomplish the objectives
- ❖ Open information flow and commitment to other group members
- ❖ High levels of trust, acceptance, and support among members
- ❖ Productive controversy and constructive management of conflict
- ❖ Distributed participation and conflict

In order for your team to work together effectively, members need to feel comfortable around each other. The more they know and appreciate about each other as people as well as group members, the better they'll work together. Much of this information and appreciation will evolve naturally over time, but the school year is so short that in order to prevent unnecessary misunderstandings or difficulties, it is helpful to speed up this process. How? One of the most efficient and effective ways to team build is to set aside a block of time very early in your term of office, when that is your only agenda item. An informal environment works best. Your agenda is to share with each other information about who you are, what you think about this organization, and how you'll expect to fit in.

If this is one of the first times the group is together at once, it is helpful to do an icebreaker. Icebreakers release tension, help people feel more comfortable with themselves and with others, break up any "cliques", and enable people to meet others in a fun way. There are different levels of icebreakers depending on how closely the group is expected to work together, how often and for how long meetings last, tasks the group is expected to complete, etc. With new groups, it's important to set a trusting climate (low key, non-threatening), to avoid personal contact and disclosure of too much personal information. As the group matures, icebreakers can change to meet the changing needs, and even to solve group conflict.

The following questions are examples of those you can ask to start the discussion and keep it on track ... Make sure each person answers every question – the point is to listen to each other.

- ❖ Why were you interested in becoming an officer/committee chair, etc.?
- ❖ What is the biggest asset you bring to this group? What's your perception of your strengths as a leader?
- ❖ Share any special interest areas, skills, areas of expertise. Where do you need more info/support/training?
- ❖ What do you want this organization to do? (establish team goals)
- ❖ How do you expect the team will achieve its goals? (action plan)
- ❖ How will we know when we get there? (develop an evaluation tool)
- ❖ What do you believe worked best/worst with this group last year?
- ❖ What are you looking forward to most about working with this year's group?

Finally, clarify your expectations of each other in terms of your notions of how you want to work together. It's helpful to write down the expectations you have in common as a kind of "working together" contract. Sample questions: What do you understand about your role and responsibilities? Do your fellow officers agree? How do you expect/want to work with fellow officers? What do you expect of yourself? How do you want to treat each other? What do you need from each other (information, support, feedback, etc.)? If someone would watch you work together, what would you want them to see?