



CHAPTER 3

ASKING FOR HELP: GETTING OTHERS ON BOARD

“We’re better together than we are apart. The American Dream has us looking out for ourselves even at the expense of our neighbors. That shit ain’t true, man.”

—Trevor D. Richardson, founder of the Subtopian magazine

If you really want to make a difference, if you really want to make things happen, you are going to need help. By bringing others into your project, you will learn new skills, be introduced to exciting new perspectives, and probably enjoy the work more, in addition to receiving help to achieve your goals.

My great-grandparents left Sweden in the late 1800s and settled in Kansas. They were farmers, and they and many of their neighbors left Sweden after suffering a number of years of failed crops and hunger during what was known in northern Europe as “the years without summer.” They didn’t know that on the other side of the world a mountain had blown up (Krakatoa in Indonesia), filling the atmosphere with ash and cooling the planet. All these farmers knew was that they needed to

leave their home, hoping for a better life in the United States. Along with traditional dishes like lutefisk, they brought strong traditions of working together. Together, these new Americans built a church that still stands. Together, they built and funded a public school, one of the first in Kansas. Together, they founded a college to train teachers, where, until the 1930s, Swedish was the language of instruction. They pooled their resources and shared their labor. Before big machines did our work for us, our forebears tackled big projects, like putting up barns or harvesting their crops, with the whole community pitching in. They simply had to. Everyone's wheat ripened at about the same time and had to be harvested quickly. By coming together to do a big job, they had the advantage of combining many people's skills, perspectives, and experiences as well as their labor. I remember my grandparents saying, "Many hands make light work," the real meaning of which I didn't understand until I learned this history later in life. I thought it was just a way to get us kids to pitch in on chores!

Many of our familiar institutions began as communal projects. In addition to schools and churches, the insurance industry got its start when members of a particular community paid into a common fund to cover those infrequent but expensive inevitabilities of life, such as fires, funerals, and caring for widows and orphans. The Odd Fellows. The Elks. The Woodsmen of the World. The traditional cooperative approach is still practiced in many immigrant communities today as members of these groups combine their resources to help each other succeed in a new country and culture.

Today, few of us would think of building our own homes, much less starting a college. Farming is done mostly by large corporations with giant, expensive equipment. Work is increasingly about being connected to a computer rather than to other people. *We are out of practice asking for help or expecting to be asked.* This makes it difficult for us to realize that we can call on others when we need help or want to fix problems beyond our capabilities. When we look, we will find many others who are also looking at the world and its problems and want to help.

“If you never ask, how can anyone ever say yes?”

Those are some of the most powerful words I have ever heard. I repeat them often (especially when people shudder at the thought of fund-raising). That question reminds us that people really want to help. Most will respond enthusiastically *but only if they are asked*. People are incredibly generous in America:²

- 95.4% of households give to charity.
- The average annual household contribution is \$2,974.
- Americans gave \$335.17 billion in 2013 (this reflects a 4.4% increase from 2011).
- In 2013, the largest source of charitable giving came from individuals, at \$241.32 billion, or 72% of total giving.
- 64.5 million adults volunteered a total of 7.9 billion hours of service, worth an estimated value of \$175 billion.
- In 2013, there were approximately 1,500,000 charitable organizations in the United States.

When you ask for help you will rapidly discover that you aren't alone. Many others are concerned about many of the same problems you are and will respond willingly to requests for help, advice, and even money. When you ask, you'll find yourself surrounded by people who will do more for you than just share the load. Working with others will sharpen your thinking, broaden your perspective, and help you communicate more effectively. Working with others will give a big boost to your efforts as well as your sense of satisfaction because many hands really do make light work.

2. Source: National Philanthropic Trust, www.nptrust.org

READY, SET, STOP

You need help. There is always much more to do than you can do yourself. Recognizing that is the first step toward success. But before you rush out like Superman or Wonder Woman to rally the forces of good and save the day, do a little looking around your community. Are there others doing similar work you can ally with? Surveying who is out there can save the time and effort that it takes to start a new movement. It can also lead to productive and innovative alliances. Don't be so narrow in your vision that you miss potential allies or waste time creating a whole new effort or organization that duplicates what someone else is already doing. Here are some of the ways you can find allies and partners, often by just tapping on your laptop or picking up your phone:

- Look online to find others connected with the issue and talk with them.
- See if national groups working on these issues have a local chapter.
- Look for groups that might be natural partners with your cause—this may include schools, museums, and other nonprofits.
- Find out which elected officials or agency staff deal with your issue and call them up; they can direct you to others interested in the same thing.
- A good way to find out who is doing what in your community is researching who local foundations are funding. The Foundation Center has a free searchable database full of good info.
- Look into a national network of progressive foundations called the Funding Exchange (fex.org). They may have an affiliated foundation in your state with a list of potential contacts.
- Read your local newspaper and look for information on local events and fundraisers as well as news on your particular topic.

Finally, never discount the importance of good old-fashioned word-of-mouth networking. Mention your interest to acquaintances, friends, colleagues, and family

members. (“Hi, How are you? What are you up to?” “Well, I’m really concerned about X and wondering how to get involved in helping address it. Do you have any advice?”) Ask if they know of existing groups or if they would be interested in helping you build a new movement or pitching in on a one-time event. Remember your elevator speech (from TRY IT NOW #1) and use it.

FROM THE TRENCHES

Same Goal, Different Actions

Almost from the first arrival of Europeans on this continent, some of the newcomers, inspired and awed by this place’s natural beauty, argued for preserving some of it from development. Writers and activists from Thoreau to John Muir to Rachel Carson challenged those who saw America simply as trees to cut, ore to mine, land to plow. Today, there are many organizations working to save and restore natural areas. Two of these groups are the Nature Conservancy and the Sierra Club. They have similar goals, but their tactics are quite different, and the debate over which of their approaches is the best sometimes gets hot.

The Sierra Club: Founded in California in 1892 by John Muir, the Sierra Club led efforts to protect some of the natural wonders of America by establishing and expanding America’s system of national parks, including Yosemite, Glacier, and Mount Rainier National Parks. The Club’s hard but losing fight to prevent damming the Hetch Hetchy Valley in the Sierra Nevadas (likened to Yosemite for its dramatic landscape) to provide drinking water for San Francisco was the first split between preservationists and conservationists. Conservationists supported the continued use of natural resources, albeit with a gentler touch, while preservationists thought that enough of the world had been logged and mined, and stopping further development of wild areas was the only responsible position. The Club intensified its preservationist and adversarial approach under David Brower in the 1960s. Spurred by plans to dam the Colorado River and flood the Grand Canyon, Brower persuaded

the board of the Sierra Club to use strategies ranging from lawsuits, massive public relations campaigns, protests, and eventually civil disobedience to oppose many threats to the environment. Brower's position was based on the idea that environmental victories are temporary, while environmental losses are permanent. Under his leadership, the Sierra Club adopted a very activist, some would say aggressive, style of advocacy to preserve nature.

The Nature Conservancy: Taking a different approach to protecting natural areas, the Nature Conservancy works with private landowners, companies, and governments to acquire land and conservation easements to protect critical habitat or natural values from development or resource extraction. Founded in 1951 and led by a former Wall Street executive, its market-based approach relies on negotiation, major fund-raising efforts, and savvy real estate skills. It has chapters in all fifty states as well as in many countries. Their record is impressive; as of 2014, the Nature Conservancy has “protected more than 119 million acres of land and 5,000 river miles” and it operates “more than 100 marine conservation projects globally.” In comparison, US national parks comprise eighty-four million acres, and federal wilderness areas add another 110 million areas of protected lands.

So, which approach is more effective? Both groups' missions address climate change, sustainable energy, and nature-friendly development. The Sierra Club generally appeals to more proregulatory activists, while the Nature Conservancy can count many market-oriented supporters. You will meet people whose ideas as well as favored approaches are similar to yours. You will also encounter many who share your goals but believe that different strategies are more effective. There are many ways to cook an egg.

SURVIVING YOUR FIRST MEETING

When I went pro as an activist—actually getting paid to advocate—I was almost giddy to discover that just about every government agency and bureau had a meeting they wanted me—me!—to come to. The calls came in so frequently that we had

a joke among ourselves that we should set up a hotline called Meetings Anonymous; if you found yourself with a night free, you could call in and find some meeting, any meeting, to go to! While being willing to serve on an advisory committee or attend a hearing on an issue you care about is part and parcel of being a good citizen and activist, to really drive your agenda you need to take charge.

And that usually means calling a meeting of your own.

In your own meeting, you set the agenda. You get to decide what you hope to achieve, who to invite, who gets to talk, and what message you want to be heard. Even the where and the when of a meeting can be significant.

That said, putting on your first meeting can be a scary thing. How do you decide what to talk about as well as who should do the talking? Where do you advertise, and what are ways to get people interested enough to give up their precious free time? What if no one shows up? Here is some practical guidance on making your meetings successful:

Step 1. Answer the question, why are you calling a meeting? A meeting is a good way to recruit volunteers, whether to plant trees or to canvass the neighborhood for a candidate or to do any other big project. A public meeting is a good way to raise awareness about your issue and create broad community support for action. Or you want to hold community leaders accountable by hosting a public forum on a particular issue. Knowing why you are asking people to show up will shape how you set up and run your meeting.

Step 2. Decide who you want to show up, and design the meeting for your target group. Are you looking for people with specific skills or connections, or do you just need lots of bodies? Is it a negotiation or a rally? You'll want to pick a setting that fits the purpose. A strategy session or an event to recruit board members will be an intimate get-together; a coffee shop or a restaurant will work well. Fighting city hall and want a crowd? Schools, community centers, and libraries are some of the places that have meeting rooms available for free or at low cost. You can get a room at a college or government agency if someone who works there sponsors the meeting.

Step 3. Prepare for your meeting. Too many people call a meeting and expect it to just happen. Maybe you've attended one of these—they tend to start late, there isn't a clear agenda, and you have trouble finding the location. This doesn't get you too excited to help out.

- Pick a convenient time. After all, you want people to show up, and if the people you want there have to work, go to church, or deal with childcare at the time you've chosen, they won't be there.
- Make sure there is good transit access or the meeting place is otherwise easy to get to.
- Lay out a clear agenda, detailing the purpose of the meeting, what you hope to accomplish during the meeting, and start and stop times. Designate roles such as facilitator, timekeeper, and scribe, and include contact information. Include ground rules to govern discussion.
- Get the word out. I first met the people who would start the Bicycle Transportation Alliance when I read a flyer posted on a telephone pole. There are many more ways to do this today, including creating Facebook events, sending text messages, placing notices in community newspapers (beware of the long lead time they require), putting up posters at public places like cafés and libraries, and using resources like Meetup and Craigslist. Then there is the tried and trusted technique: asking people in person or by phone. If you want a particular person or group to show up, call them. People love to be invited, and nothing says they matter like a personal phone call or message. If this seems like too much work, create a phone tree at your first meeting and have everyone call five of their friends for the next one.

Step 4. Run your meeting with confidence. Whether two or fifty people show up, they are there because they care about the same thing you do, so relax!

- Say hello. Take the time for introductions. If it's a small group, ask people to say their name, why they came, and something else about themselves. No speeches here! Ask everyone to take just a minute. I recently started a group out by asking them an additional question: If you could take a selfie

with anyone, famous or not, living or not, who might it be? Introductions in a larger group, say, over fifteen, could eat up all your time, so try one of these: Ask them to turn to someone in the group they don't know and introduce themselves with the same set of questions. You can even add in the selfie exercise. Five minutes is plenty of time for this. In really big groups, make requests related to your topic, for example, "Raise your hand if you've ever been stopped by the police" or "Raise your hand if your favorite tree is a Norway maple. Or how about a ginkgo?"

- Introduce yourself and other members of your planning team.
- Thank everyone for coming.
- Go over the agenda, emphasizing your purpose in asking people to come. Be clear that the agenda is there to help guide the meeting and can change to meet the group's needs.
- Go over the ground rules for an effective meeting. If you have time, ask the group to suggest their own ways they prefer to interact with others. There are many variations of this easily found on the Web, but they all include these:
 - Respect others' opinions.
 - One person speaks at a time.
 - Encourage everyone to participate.
 - Focus questions on clarifying rather than challenging.
- Recap at the end, including any conclusions the group may have come to, commitments made, next steps, and how to stay involved. Thank everyone for coming again.
- Start and end on time.

Step 5. Follow up. Follow up, follow up, follow up. Do what you said you would do and help others to follow through on their commitments, as well. This means getting everyone's name, contact numbers, and email. Before everyone leaves the room, enlist the most fervent volunteer to coordinate volunteers for you.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rex Burkholder trained as a biologist, working as a forester, recycler, and science teacher. Based in Portland, Oregon, he helped launch that city's bicycling revolution as a founder of the Bicycle Transportation Alliance. Burkholder also co-founded the Coalition for a Livable Future, breaking new ground in bringing together over one hundred diverse NGOs around issues of social and environmental justice. He served as a member of Portland's Metro Council from 2001–2013, leading efforts to reform regional transportation policy and integrate equity and climate change into operations and urban planning. Additionally, Burkholder has served on many key task forces and national boards, including Rail-volution and the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations. His work is recognized internationally and has taken him to countries in Latin America, Asia, and Europe to address sustainable transportation and climate change. In 2010, Burkholder was honored as a Global Ambassador for Ciclovía, an international movement to reclaim cities from the automobile.

For more information, visit Burkholder's blog at www.gettingto2100.org.