



University of Wisconsin Extension

610 Langdon Street, Third Floor
Madison, WI 53703-1104
608-265-8136
608-263-4999 (fax)

GUIDELINES/COMMENTARY FOR USING THE COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONAL ASSESSMENT TOOL*

Robert D. Bright, Professor
Community Development Specialist

Introduction

It is a good idea to talk about why people come together to form boards of community organizations so that they can achieve together what they cannot do alone. And yet as busy people balancing family, work, and civic social responsibilities, frequently the voluntary nature of a board makes it difficult for an organization to carry out its mission in the same manner that a corporation would with paid employees. The Community Organizational Assessment Tool is a process to help the board look at its own organization to determine how they might improve some of its functions. There are no right or wrong answers. Participants share their own perspectives on how they view the functions of the organization. Encourage board members to express their viewpoint even if they are the only one with that perspective. Review major elements of the instrument with them before asking them to complete the assessment tool. That is, call their attention to the major headings of the assessment tool. They are:

- ❖ Mission, purpose, and goals
- ❖ Organizational structure
- ❖ Membership participation
- ❖ Group relationships
- ❖ Leadership effectiveness
- ❖ Follow through on action plans
- ❖ Fiscal resources
- ❖ Community networking
- ❖ Organizational evaluation

Instructions for Completing the Assessment

Explain that each person is to write either a "yes" or "no" to each question and then in the right-hand column indicate with a mark how much that particular item needs improvement; that is, none, some, or much.

Mission. Purpose, and Goals

1. Is there
 - a. a clearly written, updated mission statement?

Ask if the organization has in the last several years taken a good look at its mission statement to make sure that it clearly states what their

mission is in 25 words or less. Ask if it is written in easy to understand language and ask if it is something that they are able to articulate easily when someone asks them what is the mission of their organization. I comment that far too often mission statements are written in a clumsy fashion, often in legal language, and are of very little use to the organization. Frequently mission statements are filed away with the bylaws and are seldom used. The purpose of a clearly written, updated mission statement is really to be able to have an organization use it in its public relations, in its communication with its board and its committees, and with the public in every way that it can.

Ask people to give you their answers to the question yes, no, or needs improvement. Count the number of people responding yes, no, and write it up on the flip chart and then also count how many people regard the updating of the mission statement needing none, some, or much improvement, Proceed recording their votes in this fashion throughout the Community Organizational Assessment Tool with each question. Comment on the positive value that board members have differing perspectives and that you will allow them to discuss them later.

b. an annual process for setting/renewing goals?

Ask if, in fact, the board sits down at least once a year and establishes goals for the future, either establishing new goals or renewing goals from the past. Comment on the tendency of voluntary community organizations to rely too much on the leadership of its president or chair to establish individual goals. Note that many organizations rely on the enthusiasm or charisma of their president, Bill, and follow the goals he has in mind for that year and in the subsequent year when it is Betty's turn to be president rely on what goals she articulates for the direction the organization will take. Comment on the difficulty leaders have in mobilizing a community organization around goals articulated by one or some of its officers. Comment on how much more effective it is when a group, the entire board, sits down at least once a year and articulates and votes on their goals together. Group goals can then be carried forward year after year regardless of who the office holders are.

2. Are the goals of the organization

a. written, agreed upon, and clear to all?

Comment on the fact that far too often goals of the organization expressed or assumed and are not written, and they are not necessarily agreed on by all and frequently are not clear to all.

b. achievable?

Comment on how too often goals are written in a manner that make them seem like exhortations to do good, but are not written in measurable objective terms, which makes it difficult to know when and if the goals are being accomplished. Get people to state goals in terms that are clear, specific, and measurable. Example: To raise \$5,000 for capitol improvements within twelve months.

3. Do all members agree on what the organization should accomplish during the next three years?

Remind the board that this would be a better question if it were asked whether the board agreed on what its long-term goals should be in the next five years. We have reduced it to three years as many volunteer community organizations have great difficulty in articulating their goals even for the next three years.

Organizational Structure

4. Do committees

- a. have clear written goals and objectives?

Point out that while boards all need to have clear written goals and objectives, it is also necessary for committees to have them as well. It is quite desirable to have committees establishing their own direction as well as receiving direction from the board.

- b. function?

Ask if all of the committees that they have are indeed functioning, meeting regularly, carrying through with either board goals and objectives or ones they have established themselves.

- c. have specific roles and responsibilities that all members of the organization understand?

Ask if it is clearly understood by all members of the board, when a given committee working in cooperation with another committee on one of the organization's goals, clearly understands which one of the committees is the lead committee and which of the committees is the support committee. Many organizations get in to difficulty because they have not clearly established which of several committees is taking the lead in monitoring the progress on a given organizational goal.

5. Is the committee structure and membership reviewed annually?

Ask them if they do at least once a year carefully review their committee structure and membership to see if in fact they need all the committees that they have and have them peopled with the properly interested community resources. Also ask if they need to add or eliminate new committees as their new projects are undertaken or old ones are met.

6. Are the organization's bylaws up-to-date?

Ask them if their organization bylaws for the most part allow them to do what they need to do and are not interfering with what they desire to do.

7. Is there a mechanism for short- and long-term planning?

Comment on the need for boards to establish both short-term goals, one or two years in length, or long-term goals, three to five years in length or more. As far as the mechanism is concerned, ask them if they have either a long-range planning committee or that they have a mechanism for asking for both short- and long-term goals to be established either by the board itself and/or with each of the committees doing the long- and short-range goal setting for itself.

8. Do terms of office provide for stable yet renewing leadership?

Ask if they have a one-year term of office resulting in revolving door leadership, or is the problem one of officers staying in the position too long without allowing for the fresh input of new officers.

Membership Participation

9. Does the organization currently have

- a. committed and active membership?

Ask if the current board members are committed and active. And you can also ask if the membership apart from the board also is committed and active.

In other words, questions 9a, b, c, d, & e can be two-part questions, one for board members and one for general members.

b. enough people to carry out its purposes and goals?

Ask if the board is of sufficient size to carry out its purpose and goals. Remind them that they can also use their committee structure to involve other members of their organization in carrying out the mission of the organization. Is the board too big, too small?

c. sufficient skills and diverse community interests and perspectives?

Ask if the board has sufficient skills to carry out the mission and purpose of the organization and has diverse community interests to ensure that the board has the proper representation of the community that it represents. If it is an area chamber of commerce, are all areas (communities) really represented on the board?

d. a system for recruiting members for specific needs?

Ask if they in fact have a system whereby they recruit members for either the board or for the general membership for specific needs of the organization. Far too often people complain about not having enough involved community members but do not have a system for recruiting people for specific needs.

e. a drop out problem?

Ask if they are experiencing a problem with many people dropping out.

Group Relationships

10. Do members

a. get along well with each other?

You might comment that it is expected that people will have different ideas and conflict with each other from time to time, but do they basically get along well with each other in spite of their differences?

b. avoid conflicts of interest?

Again, you might mention that it is natural for board members to have different points of view and therefore conflicts, but that the conflict of interest question is a question of making sure that people are not voting on their own self interests where clearly they would benefit from the vote and are not being up-front about their stake in the matter.

c. enjoy the organization's meetings and activities?

Talk about the importance of a volunteer organization being able to enjoy the work they are involved in because of the time they are giving up voluntarily to work on this matter of mutual concern. Organizations that do not enjoy their meetings have greater problems with attendance and task accomplishment.

11. Are members'

a. talents being fully utilized?

Ask if in fact either board members' or general membership's talents are being fully utilized. It is rare that an organization fully capitalizes on the talents of its members. Improvements, however, can be made in making better use of people's talents.

b. individual contributions recognized?

Ask if board members' contributions are verbally acknowledged during meetings as being outstanding. Also if from time to time people's contributions are noted either in the organization's newsletter, or that a

press release is given to the media noting the contribution of the board member, or that at least once a year outstanding contributions are recognized at the annual meeting, either by way of plaque or commendation or some other appropriate acknowledgment. Underlying recognition is the fact that people who make outstanding contributions should be recognized, especially in view of the fact that these are principally activities being undertaken by people apart from their paid employment and should be recognized as such.

Leadership Effectiveness

Before proceeding with the questions, it is good to preface this section by talking about the differences of organizations that are led by one or two individuals or organizations that are truly led by the whole board participating actively together. It might be pointed out that community organizations are dependent on many people acting together to be effective and suffer more difficulties when only a few people are thought to be responsible for leading the community organization in its efforts to accomplish its mission. The emphasis here on Leadership Effectiveness then is on the effectiveness of the group's leadership, not on any one individual's leadership.

13. Are decisions usually made by
- a. the board/officers?
 - b. the membership?
 - c. specific individuals?
 - d. combination of the above?

Before they answer these questions it should be pointed out they are to choose which way they believe the decisions are being made. Only one answer is to be provided. Please note that in regard to whether their decision making needs improvement, it is not necessary to go through a, b, c, and d, but simply to ask the question of all whether their decision making process needs improvement.

14. Does the leadership effectively
- a. represent diverse points of view?

Ask the question whether, in fact, the composition of the board itself represents diverse points of view of the community and represents diverse geographical representation of the county if that is an issue.

- b. encourage different points of view in discussion?

Ask if different points of view are encouraged in discussion. Too easily arrived at decisions may represent superficial agreement rather than having covered the more difficult differences that might strengthen the decision or alters its outcome.

- c. minimize personality differences?

Personality differences are to be expected within group interactions unless they become disruptive. Ask if the leadership suggests people with personality differences that become disruptive to deal with them outside of board meetings.

- d. deal with power struggles and hidden agendas?

Ask if the leaders are properly allowing power struggles to be dealt with in the open and are effectively getting hidden agendas on the table so that they can be dealt with at the board meetings. A meeting is the proper place for power struggles and hidden agendas to be dealt with rather than

either before or after the board meetings are over. The entire board needs to deal with these issues in their decision making capacity.

e. provide and participate in development opportunities for current/emerging leaders?

Ask if the board is providing opportunities for their own learning by calling in resource people periodically to board meetings. This would expand their knowledge base and provide opportunities for individual board members to pursue matters of new information on behalf of the board. For example, it might be appropriate to support a board or committee member's attending some workshops on marketing if the organization needs to market itself more effectively.

15. Do board and committee meetings

a. have agendas announced in advance?

The question is whether the agendas are mailed to people before they attend the meeting.

b. follow those agendas?

Question is fairly self-evident; either the agenda is followed or it isn't.

c. proceed efficiently and effectively?

Ask if the board meetings proceed pretty much on task in regards to sufficient time to discuss things without either being too excessive an amount of time or not enough to make an adequate decision.

Follow Through on Action Plans

16. Does the leadership ensure that action goes forward in an orderly manner by seeing to it that with no closure or decision made.

a. decisions are actually made?

Ask if in fact decisions are made or is there just a lot of discussion with no closure or decision made.

b. all members understand that decision?

Does someone take the time to make sure that the decision is really understood by all of the members before proceeding to the next matter?

c. someone takes responsibility?

Ask to be sure if it is clear that some one person or group of people are taking responsibility for a given task. Sometimes assumptions are falsely made as to who is taking responsibility.

d. those persons clearly understand their assignment and specific tasks?

Again, be sure people express their understanding of their assignment and task.

e. visible results occur?

Ask if in fact they are getting the results they are planning to achieve.

f. results are reported to the group?

Make sure there is a process whereby results of people's activities, whether positive or negative, are reported back to the board for further consideration.

Fiscal Resources

17. Are the organization's resources

a. sufficient to achieve its goals?

Ask the board if they believe they have sufficient resources to carry out the goals they have established for their organization.

b. being used effectively?

Ask if they believe they are using their resources as effectively as they might.

18. Is the organization driven primarily by its

a. budget?

b. goals?

Ask the organization to think about the difference between two organizations. Organization X has a budget of \$10,000 and carefully lives within that budget each year. Organization Y also has a \$10,000 budget, but decides in a given year that it must raise an additional \$2500 if it is to accomplish its purpose for that given time period. It is driven by its goal which exceeds its budget. This requires taking on some additional responsibility for fund raising. The question is, do they believe their organization is driven primarily by its budget or by its goals.

Community Networking

19. Does the organization relate to other community groups with whom they should have ongoing working relationships?

a. through ongoing, working relationships?

Ask if they have identified other organizations in the community or area with whom they should have ongoing working relationships.

b. by cooperating on projects of mutual concern?

Ask them to assess whether they are truly cooperating on projects with other community organizations where they share a common concern.

Organizational Evaluation

20. Does the organization periodically assess its

a. mission, purposes, and goals?

b. committee structure and performance?

c. membership participation?

d. quality of group relationships?

e. provision for leadership development?

f. follow through on individual and group commitments?

g. fit in the community?

h. budget and goal setting process?

Each of the component questions of this 20th question need not be answered in regards to none, some, and much, but rather after asking each of the subcomponent parts of the question, one can ask the board how much their process of organizational evaluation needs improvement.

FOLLOW THROUGH ACTIONS AFTER THE ASSESSMENT

Mission Statement

Upon their completion of the Community Organizational Assessment Tool, you may want to provide a short recap of the process they just completed. After doing that you may want to go back to the Mission, Purpose, and Goals section and clarify whether they need to spend some time working on their mission statement. If they do need to work on their mission statement, tell them you are going to give them about 10 to 15 minutes to do this; at this point distribute index cards and ask them each to write down in 25 words or less what they believe a mission statement for their organization should contain. Allow them proper time to fill this out--5 or 6 minutes--and then ask each person to read out loud their mission statement, which you record on the flip chart.

After receiving everybody's input on the mission statement, ask them to identify some of the themes expressed in their mission statements. As they express the themes, write them down on another flip chart sheet. Ask them to take another look at their mission statement to see if it is missing any critical elements. Then ask if you could have two volunteer board members to take these statements and come back to the next meeting with a draft mission statement that incorporates the input of the board members at this meeting. The draft statement can then be discussed by the board at a subsequent meeting and amended and approved if agreement is reached. The idea here is to help them identify a mission statement that clearly expresses what they are about so they can agree what the best message is to provide the community about their purpose.

Goal Setting and Priority Voting

Very often the Community Organizational Assessment Tool indicates that the board is unhappy with the way it establishes goals. I generally ask them to take another ten minutes or so to write down what short-term and long-term goals they believe their organization should have. You might ask them to consider what areas the organizational assessment process identified as needing improvement. These areas may suggest goals for the next several years. After ten minutes of silent writing down their goals on the index cards, you then proceed with the Nominal Group Process.

Listing of Committees

Once the priorities are established, come back to the flip chart and ask them to identify the names of their committees. Write them down on the flip chart. Sometimes this is a difficult task because they may have more than they need or are aware of and some committees may be dysfunctional. But, nevertheless, ask them to identify the committees they have.

Assigning Goals to Committees

Once the committees are identified, ask the board members to identify which of their priority goals should be assigned to which committees. Those goals which cannot easily be assigned to a committee should be written down as unassigned. For instance, if goal #3 is one of their priorities, ask them to which committee it should be assigned. Write after goal #3 the committee name to which it was assigned. Have somebody write down #3 after the committee listing on the flip chart. In this way there are two references for where the

goal is being assigned. Please note that if the goal to raise \$5000 for marketing is a goal that could be assigned to two committees, one finance and the other marketing, it should be assigned to both committees. The board then decides which of those two committees will be the lead committee-either the finance committee or the marketing committee. Add an asterisk by the committee identified as being the lead committee.

Finally, go through all the priorities they have established and assign them to the committees. If time permits, go back and ask them if they want to assign the goals that did not receive three votes. Let the board decide whether they want to assign such goals to committees. Once the committees are identified, ask the board members to identify

Clarify Composition of Committee

After the goals have been assigned to each committee, go back to the committee listing and ask them to identify the chair of each committee. Write down the name of that person next to the committee and ask them to name the other committee members of each committee; write down their names as well. This process can be a little clumsy because many board members are not clear about who is on what committee. This is part of their organizational problem; eventually they get it right.

Ask if their bylaws allow them to appoint community people who may not be members of the organization to serve on the committees. This is a revelation for many people. They do not realize they can have nonboard or community members and nonorganization members on their committees. Point out how useful it might be to draw in other community resource people on these different committees for their needed talents. Such action does not encumber that person with being a board member. Sometimes this activity can be very energizing when board members realize what additions they can make to their committees.

Unassigned Goals

Sometimes it is difficult to assign a goal to a committee because there doesn't seem to be an appropriate committee for that function. Refer to the unassigned goals at the top of the flip chart sheet with the committee listings and ask them whether the unassigned goals might be turned over to the executive committee or should they consider creating a new committee to handle the goals. If they need to create a new committee or eliminate one, they can do so at their next meeting.

Developing Action Plans

Last action is to facilitate a demonstration of action planning. Write down the words "what, who, when, where, and how" in linear fashion on a flip chart. Take one of their top priorities through how an action plan might be developed for that particular priority. Start with the "what" first, asking for ideas from the group. Encourage them to be specific. In regard to the "who," point out that it needs to be somebody on that committee who will take responsibility for that action. It can be more than one person; if so, identify both persons' names in the "who" section. "When" is the timeline by which they believe this action can be accomplished. "Where" is to identify the place of action where the actors will come together to do this work. "HOW" answers the question of the manner in which the actor or actors decide they want to carry out this action. In a volunteer organization especially,

it is important that the people who volunteer to do something be allowed the freedom to decide the manner in which they will do it.

Evaluation

At this point nearly three hours have passed and it is time to ask each board member individually to evaluate what they felt about the process. Give them a minute or two to focus their thoughts before asking each person in round robin fashion to comment on the evening's process. This generally concludes the first meeting of the Community Organizational Assessment Tool.

***These guidelines were developed by UWEX Community Development Specialist Bob Bright in May, 1990. They were never formally published. This is a scanned version of that document. There has been no intentional modification or editing of this original document, but there are some slight format changes that occurred in the scan process (Andy Lewis, CCED, 5-15-03).**