

Landcare Notes

Effective communication in your group

Effective communication is essential to minimise misunderstandings and conflicts and ensure your group works smoothly.

This Landcare Note includes a few key elements that will help with individual relationships and the group as a whole.

What is it?

Good communication within your group can determine its success or failure. A group, in which members communicate well, builds trust and respect between members and aids learning. Although the word 'communication' is often thought of as writing or speaking, attendance at meetings and taking part in activities are also important communication activities.

Effective communication in a Landcare group relies on members being willing to participate and respect each other when it comes to informing, discussing, listening and making decisions. Remember that communication is two-way. It involves a sending out a message and an audience that receives it.

Your group will need to have some ground rules for communication as well as a process for decision-making, the structure of meetings and the way records are kept.

How to do it

Landcare groups can often bring together passionate individuals with conflicting views.

Overcoming those differences in the interests of a common goal needs time and effort by all.

A successful group demands integrity, honesty, openness and respect from all group members.

To see how you and other members measure up in terms of effective group communication, check these points:

- Respectful of others

- Listens and learns
- Willing to set and follow rules
- Considers new ideas and approaches
- Has sincere concern for the issue(s)
- Commits time and resource to the group
- Sticks it out over the long haul
- Is a team player.

Group communications

Many groups find it useful to develop ground rules to guide communication between members. These might include:

- Express intentions and agendas honestly and openly
- Do not make disparaging remarks about others, organisations or the meeting itself
- Do not selectively distribute material
- Side conversations should be avoided
- Group materials are open to anyone, whether or not they are group members
- Do what you say you will do
- Express your need, not your position.

Communication skills

Communication skills are important to understand and practice if the group is going to work effectively. Remember: everyone has something to learn and everyone has something to give.

Active listening

Listening is as important in communicating as speaking, so be aware of these guidelines:

- Stop talking; concentrate on what is being said
- Maintain eye contact – and a relaxed position
- Review what has been said and ask for clarification if you need it



Landcare Notes

- Ask open-ended questions
- Don't interrupt, get defensive, jump to conclusions or change the subject and try not to create retorts or arguments in your head.

Fostering discussion

Constructive discussion doesn't just happen— it must be cultivated. One of your first tasks is to reach agreement on the topics or goals that are important to the group.

You need to understand and be able to achieve the common purpose you share which will help your group to communicate effectively (see Landcare Note 2.2: Strategic Planning).

There are ways to foster constructive group discussion in meetings:

- Always have an agenda (list of discussion points) and use it
- Arrange tables and chairs so everyone is included (facing each other if possible) with no physical barriers between you
- Allow each member to talk for a short time about their thoughts on the issue under discussion
- Stay on track with each subject and summarise occasionally – the facilitator or chair may help guide the discussion, and the minute-taker may ask for clarification on main points or actions that need to be recorded
- Ask questions and check frequently for consensus on issues and decisions
- Use flip charts, maps, diagrams or slides for ideas and decisions
- Organise a break during or after the meeting and organise refreshments.

Allow discussion time

Plan time for your members to learn about each other, overcome their differences and start speaking the same language. This will be

particularly important when your group is fairly new. The members need time to get to know each other and how best to communicate. Allow more time for members to resolve any disagreements, and agree to take a break from the issue at that particular time if it seems there will be no resolution at that point.

Keeping in touch

If necessary - and it usually will be – organise a way of collecting, distributing and reviewing information so everyone is equally informed.

It is important to maintain the circle of communication to maintain relationships and unity. Send small regular updates and include more substantial 'newsletters' when possible.

Email is cost-effective and less time consuming than letters and phone calls. Whatever method you choose you need to check with individual members about what methods they prefer, and what is reasonable to expect of the committee members.

Leaflets, flyers, faxes, phone calls, letters, emails and newsletters are all appropriate and useful, but consider the cost, time involved and the timing of the message when choosing the method you want to use. If you need to alert people about meetings, use your newsletter, the local paper and public notice boards, making sure there is enough time for people to plan their attendance.

As personal contact is still important, you could develop a 'telephone tree' which means fewer calls for one person and is a very effective way of keeping in touch.

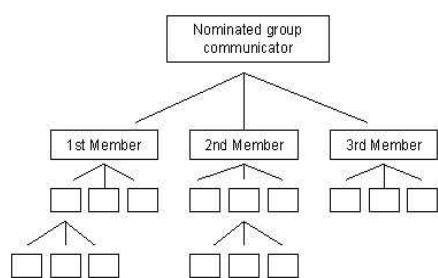
Using an email or telephone tree

Each person contacts one, two or three nominated members and passes on any urgent or important reminders. As an e-mail group list can work the same way.

It is worth spending time developing these systems for your group because they maintain the group's dynamics and ensure one person is not responsible for keeping the whole group together and informed.



Landcare Notes



Having some group rules

Rules can get in the way at times, but they can also help overcome stumbling blocks and uncertainty by providing an agreed way of getting things done. Sensible organisational structures and rules that clarify the expectations of the group can improve communications and build trust. These should be developed by the committee and working groups and agreed to by the members.

When developing these terms of how your group operates, try to balance the need for organisational structure with the group's need to be flexible and open to different ways of organising and achieving things (see also Landcare Note 1.5: Effective Meetings).

Setting ground rules

Put the group's rules in writing, seek agreement from your members, and distribute the rules. Make sure the rules are not too extensive – they just need to cover aspects of how the group agrees it will communicate from day to day. More formal rules may be part of the group's constitution or 'Model Rules' if it is incorporated.

The types of rules that your group adopts could include:

- Meeting attendance, frequency of meetings and participation
- Expected contribution of members and committee members
- Delegation of responsibility
- Time lines for reporting back to others

- Procedures for reporting to the media
- Decision-making rules.

Decision making

Many groups operate by consensus when making decisions, which means a unanimous agreement among all involved. Bear in mind that consensus works best in small groups (fewer than 15). Alternatively, you can take a vote and agree that the majority rules.

It is important to clearly define the decision making mechanism. It may be different at the committee meetings where the committee has delegated responsibility, compared to the group membership who might be involved in decision-making at general meetings.

It is smart to have an alternative method in case a decision must be made and the group is deadlocked.

Keep the lines of communication open

Effective communication skills can always be improved. Talk to other groups and see how they handle their communications and ask your group and your contacts for feedback on the way you do things – be prepared to make changes if needed.

Consider opportunities for training in areas such as active listening, presentations, report writing, newsletter production and project planning to improve the skills of your members. Invite new members to play a role in the communication activities when they join.

Keep a contact list of members and update it annually when collecting membership fees or at the AGM. If you haven't seen someone for a while, give them a call to make sure all is well and tell them they have been missed.

Make sure you return calls or messages from people who want to join the group or are volunteering to help. Your group may want to nominate a member to take a lead role in communicating with new members (Landcare Note 9.1: Recruiting and Retaining Members).



Victorian
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Landcare Notes

Landcare Note 6.1

Further references

Victorian Landcare Gateway, Resources for Groups: <http://www.landcarevic.org.au/>

Building Stronger Communities, Community Groups: <http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/>

Chamala, S and Mortis, P (1990) - *Working Together for Landcare*; Queensland Department of Primary Industries. See *Chapter 10, Developing Skills in Interpersonal Communication*.

McFarlane, G, Carpenter, J and Youl, R (1996) - *Group Skills and Community Action*: http://web.archive.org/web/20050315170751/www.neon.net.au/community/environment/grp_skills/

Related Landcare Notes

This Landcare Note is one of a series. These notes provide an excellent guide for the ongoing operation of your group.

Landcare Note 1.5: Effective Meetings

Landcare Note 2.2: Strategic Planning

Landcare Note 9.1: Recruiting and Retaining Members

Acknowledgements

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