

Two Key Ingredients for Successful Community Action Gatherings

From your own experiences, think about what a “bad” meeting is like. Is it unfocused? Does it leave you feeling like you have accomplished nothing? Is it boring or tedious? Based on insights gained in large part from the coaching of Sam Daley-Harris, who pioneered the chapter model we use, and Mark Reynolds, who used the same model at Citizens’ Climate Lobby, here are two key ingredients for successful community action gatherings.

(1) A good meeting is focused and action-filled.

A good meeting will have enough structure so that people will leave feeling like it was focused and included productive activities. To achieve this, it is important to create a space of “doing and practicing.” Carve out time to take actual actions. For example, take 15 minutes to write letters to the editor with the help of your newspaper monitor. Continue the practice of doing role-plays. Role-plays can be done for more than preparing to meet with members of Congress. They can be done for tabling, making an elevator pitch to someone you are inviting to join your chapter, etc. One can also create space for your public speaking specialists to practice giving presentations.

Sam Daley-Harris once underscored the importance of having action-oriented meetings in reference to CHA’s model of having two meetings each month:

The second meeting of the month is useless if you're not prepping for a meeting with the congressperson, writing letters to the editor together, getting your stuff organized for tabling, coaching each other on an op-ed... If you actually are not in action, and don't need that extra time to actually—no kidding—do something, then why get together a second time if it's just a [bunch of] yah, blah, blah, blah, blah? But the second meeting matters if there's real stuff going on.

In facilitating meetings, Chapter Leaders can plan in advance action portions in collaboration with members whose roles relate to specific activities—i.e., the newspaper monitor helps lead the writing of letters to the editor. A timed agenda with a timekeeper will also help the meeting stay focused and away from conversational rabbit holes that can consume time.

One final word about the importance of focus: It is not only important for the experience of a good meeting; it is also important for our larger organizational success. Our success depends upon all of our chapters having a common focus. One of the biggest dangers for chapter organizations is “mission drift.” If one chapter is focused on passing federal legislation aimed at x, while another chapter has decided to focus on local issues, and another chapter has decided to focus on a bill in the statehouse, then soon we are no longer an organization with a common purpose that can effectively impact policymakers.

This is why our monthly action sheets play an important role in keeping all of our ships “sailing in the same direction.” At the same time, our success depends upon local chapters bringing their own creativity, ingenuity, and innovation to our work. It is possible to have both a collective, nationally structured focus and creative, local actions that further the larger effort. In many ways, our structure reflects Romans 12:5 which says, “We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.”

(2) A good meeting will help foster both personal meaning and empowerment while also cultivating the joy of community.

We know that loneliness is directly related to depression and chronic stress. Now consider the anxiety, fear, and powerlessness induced by the crises of climate change and societal injustice. In the face of this, our chapters offer people the gift of a supportive, encouraging, and joy-filled community that is taking action together.

The art and science of community-building is reflected in the scriptures. One translation of Acts 2:46 says, “The believers met together in the Temple every day. They all had the same purpose. They broke bread in their homes, happy to share their food with joyful hearts.”

There is a joy that arises when those with a common sense of purpose join in fellowship together. Practices that can nourish this kind of community include:

- Beginning the meeting with a reflection or exercise that grounds your chapter in your purpose.
- Praying at the start and/or the end.
- Having food, whether it is providing snacks or doing a potluck.
- Incorporating music, whether that means singing or listening to a recording.

In leading Citizens’ Climate Lobby, Mark Reynolds made a point of both embodying joy and naming joy as a characteristic of who they were. In a popular TED Talk, the marine biologist Elizabeth Ayana Johnson presented a climate action Venn diagram:



[Source: Ayana Elizabeth Johnson](#)

As the Rev. Jim Antal has noted, there is a distinct parallel between this conception of joy-filled climate action and Frederick Buechner’s oft-quoted definition of what it means to be called: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

As a Chapter Leader for the Concord Chapter of Climate Hope Affiliates, Sue Moore has noted, “The joy comes from the ability to be able to do what we are doing.” Our spirits are lifted in the very act of utilizing our personal and collective agency. This is something we can celebrate every time we gather.