



NATIONAL WILDERNESS
STEWARDSHIP
ALLIANCE

How to Manage a Stewardship Group

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About The National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance

The mission of the National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance is to develop a growing network of volunteer-based organizations to provide stewardship for America's enduring resource of wilderness.

Our vision is to see each wilderness area within the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) adopted by a wilderness stewardship organization dedicated to protect and nurture the area's wilderness. We envision effective partnerships between community-based, non-profit wilderness stewardship organizations and all government agencies charged with the management of our national wilderness areas.

NWSA works to improve wilderness stewardship and create an allied constituency for wilderness by connecting stewardship organizations with each other, linking our efforts and experiences, directing groups to resources, and fostering new organizations.

Several of our objectives relate to your efforts to revitalize your group:

- Share knowledge, experience and expertise
- Provide new groups with start-up models of different structures, help them anticipate the questions that typically arise as groups form, and connect them with people who have built successful organizations, Sometimes helping a new group can breathe new life into an established one.
- Sponsor national and regional gatherings of stewardship groups.

If we aren't involved already, please ask us for help! We can offer some direct resources. But more important, we can put you in touch with local volunteer stewards in your area and across the country — volunteers like yourself, but who have already walked this trail and know the way.

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Introduction

This guide is written for people who belong to an existing wilderness stewardship organization and want helpful information on how to manage it.

Groups range in size and scope from a handful of people organized to help manage a local wilderness area to multi-state organizations supporting many wilderness areas. Some groups focus entirely on wilderness, while others include wilderness stewardship as just one subset of interests. While every stewardship organization is unique, most face similar management issues and concerns.

Picture you are stepping into a wilderness. You are quite familiar with the territory and consider it a second home. Your maps are current and up to date. You feel a personal connection to this land and are quite active as a steward. There is a lot of work to be done, and you can't do it all on your own. You have a team working with you, and together you are able to spread the load and cover a lot of ground.

Dyan Oldenburg of Training Resources for the Environmental Community (TREC), is one of the great facilitators. (She says she quit counting after she had facilitated meetings for 1,000 NGOs.) When she facilitated a Board Retreat for NWSA, she offered two guidelines:

The FDR Principle: Do something. If it doesn't work, do something else. But do something!

The Keep-Moving Mantra: Good Enough; Minimum Specs; Move On.

This guide offers five big Steps to Management, each with many smaller steps:

- Review and Appraise Your Goals
- Nurture Relationships with Your Partners
- Pay for Your Program
- Develop Your Leadership Team
- Institutionalize Your Organization

Review and Appraise Your Goals

When you formed your organization, you set in place goals and objectives. How often do you review your progress in meeting those goals? How do you measure success? And how often do you revisit your goals to make sure they are taking you in the right direction?

Your organization should review and appraise goals at least once a year. Schedule a meeting with your Board of Directors and other organization leaders at the beginning or slowest time of the year. Discuss openly and candidly how well you met the goals you previously set. You can formalize this process with checklists or forms to rank progress and foster discussion.

You can locate many free resources on the Internet to help evaluate your organization and leadership team. Take the time to perform these evaluations – you don't know if you are on the right track if you don't take the time to check your bearings.

Make sure you foster open and candid communication in this process. You don't want a room full of people afraid to discuss your organization's shortcomings. How do you react to criticism about your programs, your progress, or even your personal leadership style? It can be difficult to listen to someone point out problems or failings, but you need to develop an environment that encourages constructive criticism. Welcome these discussions because they will allow you to do a better job of achieving the purpose your organization exists for.

Sometimes opportunities arise for your organization that might change the focus or priorities that were initially established when it was founded. Another organization might want to partner with you, or even merge. The Agency you partner with might want you to take on other tasks and assignments that differ from your original charter. Your initial focus, for instance, might have started as strictly wilderness related, but the Agency needs some help on areas outside the wilderness. These opportunities can enrich and expand your organization – but they can also change the structure and characteristics of it as well. Review the potential impact these new tasks and endeavors might have for your organization. Will they enhance or sacrifice your original charter – and are you okay with that?

Nurture Relationships with Your Partners

You sought out and developed relationships when your organization was a start-up. How are those relationships going today? This may be one of the most overlooked aspects of managing wilderness stewardship organizations – you must constantly and continuously nurture your existing relationships. In addition, you want to continuously be on the lookout for new potential relationships and partnerships.

Nurture and Develop Core Volunteers

People have various and different reasons why they volunteer, and people have unique and individual motivations. While volunteering is a selfless action, don't assume that volunteers don't need to be motivated.

Some volunteers may be satisfied with the self-knowledge that what they do is valuable and worthwhile, but most people want to feel that their contribution matters. When volunteers feel that their effort isn't important they will find some other place to devote their efforts. Some of your volunteers make a significant sacrifice to be part of your organization. It takes them away from family and friends, and sometimes interferes with career goals. Make sure you recognize their contributions loudly and regularly.

Don't assume all volunteer are motivated by the same thing – nor should you assume that things that DON'T motivate you don't motivate someone else. You might find little motivation in an annual service plaque, but others might appreciate filling a wall in their office with them. Some people are motivated through greater responsibilities, but some just want to be helpers. Some people appreciate recognition for the number of years or hours they serve, others like to have their particular skills and talents put to use. Some want to learn new challenges; others may be looking for social or networking opportunities. The key thing to remember is one size does not fit everybody. Get to know your volunteers – don't take them for granted. Find out why they volunteer, and you may find ways to tailor motivation for each individual.

Nurture and Develop Your Agency Relationships

Don't neglect the relationships you have with the Agency responsible for managing your wilderness. Keep the lines of communication open, and make it a point to discover what their needs and concerns are. It is safe to assume that they are tasked with shrinking budgets and expanding responsibilities. Make sure they view your organization and volunteers as a solution to, rather than a cause of, their problems.

At some point in your organization's history, one of your volunteers will do something in the wilderness that a visitor will find a need to write to complain about. Sometimes your volunteer is doing everything correct, but the visitor disagrees with the policy. Sometimes your volunteer might simply make the wrong decision. If you nurture the relationship with your Agency partners, they will be more likely to want to work with you to correct the issue.

Don't forget that the Agency is not stagnant. People will retire, get promoted, or move out of the area. Keep abreast of organization moves, and make sure you work immediately to build good relationships with new people in the Agency. Don't assume new staff will understand the role your organization performs. During times of transition your organization can also be seen as a source of continuity.

The Agency may want you to take on other tasks and assignments that differ from your original charter. This may open opportunities that can help your stewardship organization achieve its core purpose.

Nurture Relationship with Other Supporters and Partners

Your membership in NWSA can put you in contact with people doing similar work in other parts of the country. Many of these people can provide advice and support. You might not need to reinvent the wheel if another organization has already experienced a situation you are dealing with. (They might even offer great advice about what didn't work for them.)

What other supporters or partners can help your organization? Think about local businesses and other groups. How does your work benefit them? Your stewardship of a local wilderness area might benefit campground concessionaires, stores, outfitters, youth groups, and other potential allies and partners.

Another organization might want to partner with you, or even merge. Your organization may have grown enough to let you expand what you take on.

Nurture Relationships Continuously

Never consider the task complete. You must constantly and continuously nurture your existing relationships. Informal contacts (such as discussions over coffee or lunch) are sometimes most useful, but formal gatherings (such as regularly scheduled feedback sessions) also have their place. Does your Agency or other partners have representatives who either sit on your Board or who regularly attend meetings?

This isn't the work of only one person. The more personal links you have between your organization and other partners, the stronger the relationships will be. In addition, you want to continuously be on the lookout for new potential relationships and partnerships.

Think of it this way: each relationship you build results in another person who shares commitment to your wilderness, your organization, and your goals.

Pay for your Program

It is a simple reality that running a successful wilderness stewardship organization requires funding. Some organizations attempt to operate without funding (relying on volunteers to foot all expenses) but those organizations will have difficulty remaining viable in the long run. Fundraising can be a thorny issue for some groups – after all, your passion is wilderness and not dollars. Proper funding, though, will assure that your organization is able to survive for the long haul – and your wilderness deserves the effort required for you to continue to support it.

Can Non-Profits Make a Profit?

One of the biggest misconceptions is that a non-profit corporation can't make a profit. You can sell products and offer services for a profit, just like a for-profit corporation. The difference is what you are able to DO with the profit. A for-profit corporation (such as Exxon or Microsoft) is able to distribute profits to shareholders. Your non-profit corporation must put the profit back into the corporation.

Another way to view the difference: a for-profit corporation does things to make money, while a non-profit corporation makes money to do things.

Make it a Priority

Funding typically does not magically appear in a non-profit's bank account – you need to actively seek it out. Make sure you devote energy and resources to keep your organization funded. If you are not

serious about doing the work to assure your programs are properly funded don't expect donors to be serious either.

Money tends to be a turn-off for many non-profits. Get over it. If your program is worth doing it is worth properly funding. Make sure you devote the necessary time and efforts to obtain funding for your program. You might not be the best person to do this work. Chances are there is a person in your organization who knows how to do this – and enjoys doing it. Invite them to join the Board.

Low Hanging Fruit

You likely have several funding sources that are available with little effort. Consider these sources:

- Volunteers' employers. Many employers offer their employees matching funds for donations or volunteer work. Some companies will make matching donations if employees donate to the company's PAC. Company supported foundations can also be a source of funding. Regularly remind your volunteers to check available funding opportunities with their employers.
- Board Members. Donors want to be confident that their donation will be going to a fiscally sound organization. They want to have assurance that your Board is as committed as you are asking donors to be. Some will measure this commitment the same way you measure their commitment – by the willingness of your board members to contribute financially. They want to know your board members have "skin in the game". Some board members may believe – perhaps rightly so – that this doesn't recognize their commitment in time and labor. Make it clear to all board members that they are a visible face to the organization and their willingness to contribute financially sends a positive signal to potential donors about the organization's long-term outlook.
- ASK! People often aren't aware you have a need unless you let them know. Let them know on your website, in your newsletters, in your discussions, etc.
- Memberships. Create a membership program so people can be part of your organization even if they can't devote volunteer time. Your volunteers are not the only people who love your wilderness – create the opportunity for others to become stewards by helping those who can volunteer. If you have a membership program don't forget to ask people to renew. Offer free memberships to people or groups that help you out in some way – many will renew their membership after the free term expires.
- Plan and prepare. If a potential donor asks what you would do with their donation make sure you have an answer. What would you do with \$5,000? \$50,000? \$500, You're your answers will also allow you to envision the potentials for your organization.

Moderate and Advanced Fundraising

Some fundraising can be done with little effort, but most of your funding will require you to put some effort into it. You need to dedicate resources to these efforts. Small organizations can operate with volunteer fundraisers (perhaps a Fundraising Chairperson on the Board), but larger groups might need to hire staff. Consider the following potential opportunities:

- **Merchandise Sales.** You can offer maps, books, and other educational materials to visitors and supporters of your wilderness. You may need to obtain agreements from your Agency partner if you sell merchandise through their offices. Set up merchandise sales through your organization's website.
- **Workplace Giving Campaigns.** The United Way, EarthShare, and other federations provide ways to make it easy for employees to contribute to non-profit organizations through payroll deductions. Become a member of these federations. Many companies will allow employees to contribute to unaffiliated non-profits – if you don't become a member make sure you provide volunteers and supporters the necessary information so they can write you in.
- **Grants.** Corporations, private foundations, and government agencies provide funding for many projects and programs. Devote resources to locate, research, and apply for grants.
- **Fundraising Events.** Your organization can sponsor events that can generate funds (and supporters) for your organization. Races, music festivals, film festivals, pancake breakfasts, and other events can generate publicity and support for your organization and provide you the opportunity to educate the public about your wilderness.
- **Planned Giving.** Provide volunteers and supporters the opportunity to support your wilderness after they pass on. Most of them do what they do because they want the wilderness to be preserved for future generations – provide them the ability to continue to support the cause when they are gone.

Financial Management

The larger your organization becomes the more you will need professionals and experts to help with financial management. People entrust their donations to you to do good work – make sure your organization deserves their trust.

Continuously review policies and procedures to assure funds are not mishandled or mismanaged. Have a written whistle-blower policy. Foster an atmosphere of trust – how you react to bad news plays a major role in whether people feel comfortable coming forward.

Develop Your Leadership Team

We have all heard stories of child prodigies who sit down to a piano for the first time and play masterfully. It is possible that your organization is comprised of similar prodigies who instinctively know exactly how to lead and manage a non-profit wilderness stewardship organization. For the rest of us, however, we need to continuously work at developing our leadership skills.

Who is your leadership team? Your bylaws should spell out the responsibilities and duties of officers and Board members. If you have staff positions or other positions you should have job descriptions for them.

Officers

At a minimum, your bylaws should describe four officer positions (President/Chair, Vice-President/Vice-Chair, Treasurer, and Secretary). Your bylaws should describe basic responsibilities and explain qualifications, how they are selected, terms of office, and how they can be removed. In most organizations your officers will be elected by your Board of Directors, though some organizations might have elections by all members.

Your officers should be selected for their roles based on capabilities rather than personalities. Your organization will suffer if you place people in these important roles simply as a reward for service, for instance.

Re-election of officers should not be automatic. You owe it to the long-term viability of your organization to vote based on the needs of the organization. Assess all candidates for office, including standing officers.

Does your Board review the performance of its officers? Sometimes non-profit organizations lose sight of the responsibility to conduct business just as seriously and professionally as for-profit corporations. Officers should have goals and objectives, and reviews provide the opportunity to determine if those goals are met.

Board of Directors

Your bylaws should also detail the duties, responsibilities, and terms of office of board members. How does your organization determine who sits on the Board? Your Board provides leadership and direction to the organization, and generally to the officers, and should be comprised of people capable of performing these functions. Board membership should not be merely a reward for service.

Your Board should also review its own performance, as well as review the status of the organization. Do you meet your goals and objectives? Do you periodically reassess the goals to determine if you need to make course changes?

Search online for various forms and other tools to help you review Board performance.

Institutionalize Your Organization

How does your organization make decisions? Do you have a formal decision-making process, or do you rely on one or two strong leaders to decide? What would happen to your organization (and the wilderness it serves) if your current leadership team were no longer able to serve? How do you assure that your organization survives into the future?

Sudden Changes in Structure

Some organizations refer to it as “being hit by a bus.” While we certainly hope you don’t want to fantasize about actual harm coming to any member of your organization, you should periodically consider what the fate of your organization would be if key players could no longer serve. Perhaps a job offer takes a key leader out of state, or family issues require them to scale back on their availability. Life’s ups and downs will continue to operate on your team whether you plan for it or not.

Who is in charge of directing your volunteers? If they became incapacitated do you know what needs to be done to carry on the program? You should continuously review your program and plan contingencies if you were to lose key people. Document processes so others can figure out how to do them if necessary.

It is a fact and reality that every member of your organization is mortal. You want to make sure your organization will live on well after key people are no longer able to contribute. Have a succession plan and review it annually.

Founder’s Syndrome

Those who founded your wilderness stewardship organization did so through love and dedication and the desire to make a permanent impact by preserving special places in our country. Like all such organizations, yours started out small and survived because of the tireless efforts of a few dedicated founders who put their heart and soul into the job. In fact, you may be one of those founders.

At some point your organization will change. The scope of your activities will widen, you will discover new opportunities, and you will experience turnover of volunteers and officers. New people will bring new ideas. How does your organization handle this? It is crucial to the survival of your organization that you consider

Sometimes the changes your organization goes through exceed the skillset of the original founders. The passion and dedication they breathed into the organization can become disruptive and damaging if they don’t recognize the need to build longevity into the process.

Some warning signs that you may be suffering founder’s syndrome:

- Decision-making is centered around founders. The Board, for instance, might vote to do some action, but a single founder’s veto can kill the idea in its tracks.

- The organization is tightly identified as an extension of the founder. The founder's personality and charisma might overshadow the goals and objectives of the organization.
- The Board is the founder's rubber stamp. The founder might control who sits on the Board, what decisions the Board can make, and other key decisions.

How to combat founder's syndrome:

- If you are a founder, take an honest assessment with yourself. Have you become so closely attached to the organization that it is an extension of you? If so, you may be creating a dependency that will result in the organization dying when you can no longer lead.
- Perform an annual risk assessment of your organization.
- Coach and support the founder. Constantly reassure the founder that building an organization that can survive all of you is the primary goal. Get input from the founder on how this might be achieved. Perform assessments and reviews on your leaders and focus on accountability.
- Strengthen and develop your fundraising committee. Often the finances of an organization are too closely tied to individuals, so that if they leave the donors and backers leave with them.
- Perform strategic planning. Identify two to three key issues facing your organization, and get the Board involved to identify and execute solutions.
- In the end, the Board may need to replace the founder. If replacing the founder would cause the organization's collapse, you may need to accept that the organization would not be able to survive the founder anyway. You may need to lead the founder to the edge of the abyss to awaken the reality that the organization they devoted so much energy to will not likely survive them.

Acknowledgements

Jarome Wilson of the San Geronio Wilderness Association provided the overall outline and content for this Guide. “I became President of SGWA in the midst of a funding crisis,” Jarome says. “Many of the suggestions in the guide are from that experience – either things that worked or things I wish we had done in hindsight.” Significant editorial contributions were made by Dave Cantrell.

Additional Resources

The National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance website has a number of resources for stewardship groups. Visit us at: www.wildernessalliance.org

Developing Successful Wilderness Stewardship Partnerships, by Heather Day. She interviewed thirty Wilderness stewardship nonprofit and Agency staff and synthesizes the responses into keys to successful partnerships.

<http://www.wildernessalliance.org/toolkit/working-with-agencies/142-developing-successful-wilderness-stewardship-partnerships>