

Mentorship and peer support

Non-government organisations can be tough places to work. Many have high rates of staff and volunteer turnover and burnout – 40% per annum or even higher. Campaigners are often expected to hit the ground running, meet high expectations and be all things to all people. Simple institutional arrangements, like the three options outlined here, can make a huge difference to campaigners' sense of support and their long-term sustainability.

1. Buddy system

Each campaigner identifies one person to act as mentor/buddy. The two meet for lunch or a one-hour walk routinely once every week or fortnight. The agenda is not rigid but flexible to accommodate whatever is on the campaigner's mind: political challenges, campaign frustrations, organisational problems... whatever. The mentor's role is primarily to listen, not to propose or take responsibility for solutions.

An appropriate buddy is: (1) regularly available and not over-committed; (2) someone with experience, skills and knowledge relevant to the campaigner's role and campaign; (3) a good listener who can maintain confidentiality. Buddies who are also members of the organisation's board or management committee – or fellow campaigners - can help the organisation address structural issues that add to staff pressures.

Three basic questions that provide a structure for these sessions are:

1. What have been the highlights of the last week or fortnight?
2. What are one or two issues or problems requiring resolution?
3. How might these be resolved?

Audit the arrangement regularly. Ask campaigners if their mentor is a good 'match' in terms of interests, availability and compatibility.

2. Peer support group

Peer support groups provide campaigners with an opportunity to reflect on the challenges they face in their daily work, identify vexing choices and draw on the wisdom and experience of a supportive group of peers. In the pressure-cooker environment characteristic of many campaigning organisations, setting up a peer support group is an important survival strategy and warrants prioritising.

For a peer support group to offer real support, meetings should ideally be no less frequent than monthly. Confidentiality is crucial. Each meeting may start with members 'checking in' by reflecting on their work: highlights, lowlights and challenges. Perhaps one or two members could then speak in greater detail about their work and inviting observations and support from other members.

Clearness committees are one specific form of support group found in social action organisations. They have been utilised by Quaker groups to support members. Clearness committees meet with a person who is unclear on how to proceed in a keenly felt concern or dilemma, hoping that it can help this person reach clarity. Group members need to be trustworthy, honest and impartial. Rather than simply proposing solutions as some kind of external authority, clearness committees help people solve their own problems.

Useful resources:

- o <http://www.crossroads-center.org/programs/fall2004/clearness.php>
- o <http://groundwork.ucsd.edu/clearness.htm>
- o Green, Tova & Woodrow, Peter (1994) *Action: How to Nurture, Support & Sustain Commitments*, New Society Publishers, Philadelphia.

3. Performance appraisal

A performance appraisal is a formal review of the extent to which campaigners are fulfilling defined responsibilities. Position descriptions for staff and key volunteers define these responsibilities and the frequency and format of review procedures.

In the public service and industry, performance appraisal tends to be handled by an employee's line manager. Community sector organisations may choose to invite people from outside the organisation who work closely with the campaigner to participate in the process. And it is important to ensure the individual whose performance is being evaluated has ample opportunities to contribute to the review.

Steps involved in performance appraisal include:

1. Convene a small working group to manage the appraisal process. Include both staff and executive. Groups with a strong volunteer base might also include volunteers in the process.
2. Confirm the person's key responsibilities. If these have not previously been articulated in a position description, a performance appraisal is not the time or place to do this.
3. Develop a questionnaire (or discussion prompts) based on these key responsibilities.
4. Solicit responses to the questionnaire or prompts from the individual, their line manager and one or more colleagues from within or outside the organisation.
5. The working group then summarises these responses and convenes a meeting with the individual and their line manager to discuss the review responses.
6. On the basis of this discussion, the working group may recommend interventions such as additional support or supervision, specific training or changes to the individual's approach.
7. These recommendations need to be monitored and reviewed during the individual next review.

Useful resources:

- <http://www.performance-appraisal.com/intro.htm>
- <http://www-hr.ucsd.edu/~staffeducation/guide/eval.html>