

The Effective Grassroots Association, Part One Organizational Factors That Produce Internal Impact

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GRASSROOTS associations (GAs) are locally based, significantly autonomous, volunteer-run, formal nonprofit groups that manifest significant voluntary altruism as a group; they use the associational form of organization and thus have an official membership of volunteers who perform all or nearly all of the work done in and by the nonprofits. This report reviews some of what is known about the factors that make GAs effective in helping or otherwise affecting their members (for example, politicization). The method used is a comprehensive literature review.

GAs and their active members as associational volunteers exist in the United States and other nations in great numbers (Smith, 1997b, 1997c). This is shown in more detail in the yet-to-be-published “The World History and Geography of Associations and Other Nonprofits” by D. H. Smith and Associates (publisher uncertain). Cumulatively, GAs have many kinds of significant impact on their members—GA “internal impact” (Smith, in press, 1997a). They provide comembers with social support, fellowship, mutual aid, and peer helping (“peer service,” as contrasted with “client service”) as in such GAs as Alcoholics Anonymous, church-related couples clubs, and college fraternities and sororities. They give their members stimulation, information, and self-expression—including deep and jointly held satisfaction as in study or discussion GAs; feminist GAs; and GA religious groups, sects, and cults. They generate and focus individual members’ sociopolitical activation and influence, especially in the local political arena, but also as the grassroots base of national or international sociopolitical movements (GAs such as local Republican or

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Democratic committees, local Leagues of Women Voters, local civic clubs such as Rotary or Kiwanis, and local environmental GAs).

This article focuses on how GAs accomplish such impacts through their organizational structures and processes (Smith, 1997a, in press). I use the term *impact* consistently to refer to what GAs do to their members or their environments or (rarely) both. By contrast, I use the term *effectiveness* to refer to the actual GA organizational activities and structures that foster either kind of impact. Presumably, every GA that has an impact also has some effectiveness factors in the sense of organizational ways of bringing about that impact.

Research studies that focus on the GA effectiveness question are rather uncommon (but see Smith and Shen, 1996). In one superficial sense, the question of effectiveness has been already solved for us, if we can believe the cumulative experience of the authors of books and articles that tell us how to organize and operate effective GAs and paid-staff associations at different territorial levels (American Society of Association Executives and Chamber of Commerce of the United States, 1975; Chrislip and Larson, 1994; Conrad and Glenn, 1983; Flanagan, 1984; Mason, 1984; Milligan and Milligan, 1965). But in most of these instances (though not Mason, 1984), effectiveness advice is *not* based on much, if any, research, although the advice is nearly always based on the author's useful experience in the types of group or organization discussed.

One general factor in GA effectiveness for nearly any kind of GA is the birth and survival of the organization. Unborn, stillborn, or dead GAs tend to have little or no impact, and hence organizational "life" is a major effectiveness factor for GA impact. A second general organizational effectiveness factor is significant member participation over time: since GAs are by definition volunteer groups, nearly anything that promotes greater long-term participation among members or maintenance of higher levels of participation tends to make the GA more effective in affecting members. GAs in which few people participate or in which member turnover is very high cannot have much impact.

In short, a GA must be born and survive for a while (at least a year or two), and it must attract and hold volunteer members and leaders no matter what else it does, if it is to have a significant impact. Note that I do *not* include attracting significant funding as necessary. GAs are not about such resources, and they can have a significant impact without much money. *Volunteer time* is the central resource of volunteer groups.

Organizational Effectiveness for Internal Impact of GAs

One place to start looking for internal effectiveness factors is in the research literature on self-help GAs, which often have a powerful member impact (Gartner and Riessman, 1977; Katz, 1993; Katz and

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Bender, 1976; Lieberman and Borman, 1979; Powell, 1994; Smith and Reddy, 1973; Wuthnow, 1994).

Self-Help GAs

A number of aspects of self-help GAs foster internal impact.

Small Size. The small size of self-help GAs is one important factor in their capacity to have an impact on their members. In Smith (in press), I present data that suggest GAs are small in membership size, especially if median figures are used. Wuthnow (1994) estimates that the millions of small support GAs in America, including self-help GAs, have an average (mean) size of twenty-five persons.

Intense Interaction. The small size of these groups is partly dictated by the fact that bringing about intense face-to-face interaction is central to their activities and existence and could not take place very well in larger GAs (Lieberman, 1989). Put alternatively, such groups need small size structurally to permit the interactions among members that help produce significant personal change. This kind of interaction would be unlikely in a self-help GA of five hundred members all present in one meeting room (although breaking down into smaller groups for discussion and interaction would probably help substantially).

Cohesion. Generating high cohesion, mutual support, and solidarity are quite important to the impact on members of self-help GAs (Droghe, Arnston, and Norton, 1986; Galanter, 1990; Kurtz, 1990; Maton, 1988; Petrunik, 1972; Suler, 1984). It is not sufficient to have small group size. The group must also structure activities to foster close relationships among those present at a meeting, so that members become committed to each other as people and also to the larger GA itself, its goals, and its activities. Members thus committed are more likely to accept and absorb the group's ideology or message regarding personal change and consequently improve self-esteem and well-being (Maton, 1988). Lackner, Goldenberg, Arrizza, and Tjosvold (1994) suggest that individual support networks are activated in self-help GAs based on the history of past relationships, personal coping abilities, and the perceived state of the overall support network of a member including people outside the GA.

Peer Membership. Having members who are peers—which, in the case of self-help GAs means members suffering (or formerly suffering) from the same problem or else members of a family in which someone is a sufferer—makes it much easier to develop social cohesion and mutual aid (Katz, 1970, 1993). People who are not “fellow sufferers” in some sense (directly or through a significant other) are often seen as not really understanding one's problem, and hence “different” and unable to be truly helpful, however well-meaning (Silverman, 1970). Receiving help from peers reduces the recipient's negative feelings about being helped, which otherwise tend to make him or her feel inferior, embarrassed, and dependent (Gross, Wallston, and Piliavin, 1980; Krebs and Miller, 1985).

Acceptance. This cohesion comes in part from a group structure and ideology that attempt to make newcomers as well as longer-term members feel accepted and affirmed by the group and its members (Galanter, 1990). Because most of the conditions for which self-help GA members seek aid are stigmatized by society (alcoholism, mental problems, compulsive gambling), this group affirmation and social reinforcement tends to give the newcomer some relief from emotional distress at having the stigmatized condition or characteristic. Most self-help groups have norms and corresponding roles regarding making newcomers feel welcome and affirmed as people.

Sponsorship. “Zealous believers” are especially important in this process (Galanter, 1990). In Alcoholics Anonymous, older members make newcomers feel at home. A special sponsorship system exists so that every member can identify a more experienced member who will help him or her if needed (tempted to drink) and whom the member can talk with (Gellman, 1964; Rudy, 1986). As a “sober alcoholic,” the sponsor can readily empathize with the problems of the newcomer; this is the fundamental logic of self-help groups. Most of the other “twelve-step” self-help GAs modeled on AA (Beattie, 1990) have similar arrangements.

Shared Experience. Self-help groups centrally involve sharing experiences around the central problem of all members as a basic process for recovery (Antze, 1976; Rudy, 1986). Borkman (1976) has pointed out that for self-help group members such experiential knowledge of the central problem and its consequences is crucial to the functioning of these groups. The stories that are told, usually by long-time members, are object lessons for newcomers and also remind other members of what they still need to avoid. The stories usually end with the storyteller finding the self-help group, following its prescribed path to recovery, and becoming whole as a result.

Druhle (1988) refers to reviving bad memories of one’s central personal problem as essential to individual recovery in AA GAs. This is the basic indoctrination of members into the group and another way in which long-time members help newcomers recover and help the long-term members themselves maintain their recovery and sobriety. Giving other members advice implicitly by reciting one’s own experiences as an example is also important.

Reciprocity. Supporting this line of argument and kind of activity, Lieberman (1989) found that self-help GAs for widows and widowers had a positive impact on members principally because of individuals developing a reciprocal social exchange relationship with at least one other member of the group (group participation per se did not matter). Specific group norms of emotional expression foster this result. Gartner and Riessman (1977, p. 99, from Riessman earlier) call this process the “helper-therapy principle,” in which “those who help are helped most.” Self-help really means mutual help, with veteran members being more helpful to newcomers than vice versa.

Participation. Self-help GA impact on members is fostered in general as individuals attain high levels of participation in the group, although still more involvement may be required as noted just above (Kurtz, 1990; Lieberman and Vicleka-Sherman, 1986). Merely being a member of such a group is not necessarily associated with individual member impact (Kurtz, 1990). These groups hold frequent meetings (at least weekly, usually) to permit and encourage high participation (Galanter, 1990). Impact tends to be greater as members become involved more heavily both as givers and receivers of support, not just as regular attendees at meetings (Kurtz, 1990; Lieberman, 1989). Most groups have norms that foster active participation and expression of one's feelings in group meetings (Lieberman, 1989). In Alcoholics Anonymous, for instance, newcomers are urged to "work the program" and to go to AA meetings *daily* at first for ninety days (Rudy, 1986). Longer membership is probably associated with more impact, and AA celebrates yearly anniversaries of initial lasting sobriety (Rudy, 1986).

Ideology. The group must have a well-developed ideology regarding the problems of its members and how they can be resolved—"the secret of recovery" (Ablon, 1981; Antze, 1976; Galanter, 1990; Gartner and Riessman, 1977; Petrunik, 1972; Suler, 1984). Antze (1976) calls this ideology a "cognitive antidote" to the dysfunctional beliefs that are at the root of the individual's problems and notes that the ideology is often published in a book. Antze also refers to the "persuasive function" of the ideology as important; the ideology must be convincing to members for the self-help GA process to work.

Pressure to Change. Essential to this ideology is group pressure for the member to change, using the self-change methodology of the group (Jurik, 1987). There is usually an implicit (or even explicit) guarantee that if the newcomer follows the methodology, he or she will in time resolve whatever central problem is present, even if it has endured lifelong thus far. Self-help GAs can virtually guarantee this because they mainly work on the member's feelings, beliefs, and behaviors, not on physiology (although some addictions have physiological components).

Also, the group often focuses on a very specific member problem, such as self-esteem, rather than promising to change the member's whole life (Galanter, 1990). In the case of irremediable personal problems (one's own terminal illness or that of a child, death of a spouse, one's dwarf stature), the change recommended by group ideology is change in one's outlook, accepting self-identity rather than fighting against it (Ablon, 1981).

New Identity. The group's use of ideology aims at altering the state of consciousness of newcomers, thus promoting a new identity and changed view of self and perhaps of the world (Galanter, 1990; Greil and Rudy, 1984). Kurtz (1990) refers to this as the reconstruction of a positive identity in place of a damaged, deviant, or stigmatized one (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963; Sagarin, 1969). Through its

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Standard of Reference. This is all accomplished basically by getting the newcomer to identify with the other, similar, peer members of the group who believe in and exemplify the ideology, in place of identifying with “normal” and often uncaring or even hateful nonmembers (Greil and Rudy, 1984; Katz, 1970). Hence, fellowship and group cohesion as discussed earlier are of crucial importance. Katz and Bender (1976) refer to this process as the self-help GAs supplying a new reference group, a standard for judging what is right and true for the member. Maintaining and transmitting the group ideology are basic processes of this kind of GA (Suler and Bartholemew, 1986). In part the process is dependent on the self-help GA having an open and accepting status system into which newcomers can easily fit (Katz, 1970, 1993).

Encapsulation. Greil and Rudy (1984) discuss identity transformation (conversion, resocialization) organizations generally, along with material on self-help GAs. They point out that a key element of such groups is their promotion of restricting communication to other members, rather than continuing normal amounts of interaction with nonmembers. This permits greater development of cohesion within the group, and hence faster and deeper acceptance of the group’s ideology by newcomers. This encapsulation can be physical isolation, social isolation, or ideological isolation (the latter to mean being in one’s own world thanks to the new ideology, even if out among nonmembers). Each form of encapsulation contributes to making the members feel they are in a “social cocoon” and to reducing the chances that members encounter outsiders who threaten the ideology of the group (Galanter, 1990). Strong emphasis on encapsulation, however, interferes somewhat with other group goals, such as attracting money and new members or satisfying current members.

Simple Structure. Self-help GAs attempt to maintain noncomplex, nonbureaucratic, and nonhierarchical structures (Gartner and Riessman, 1977; Katz and Bender, 1976). This informality permits and even fosters the kinds of high-level participation, close interpersonal relationships, and sharing of experiences that the group needs in order to accomplish its goals (Traunstein and Steinman, 1973). It also makes for a status structure acceptable to people with personalities damaged because of social stigma (Katz, 1970). Newcomers fit in easily. Other members are peers, not superiors, and this fosters communication among members (Katz, 1970). However, Trojan, Halves, Wetendorf, and Bauer (1990) identify a series of stages of increasing self-help GA bureaucratization and organizational complexity that tend to take place in time, irrespective of membership size, although not every group must go through all the stages.

Autonomy. Along the same lines, self-help GAs tend to be most successful when they are autonomous of health and social service professionals (Gartner and Riessman, 1977; Hurvitz, 1977; Stewart, 1990). Successful groups may have relationships with professionals, but such groups are not directed or dominated by them. Based on a review of the literature, Stewart's (1990) recommendation is that the professional should take a nondirective and nonauthoritarian role as consultant to the group, if she or he is present at all. The self-help process as discussed above is distorted by intensive professional involvement, among other reasons because professional perspectives tend to differ significantly from self-help group ideologies, which are more effective for many people.

Advocacy. Self-help groups sometimes provide for sociopolitical advocacy (1) to change the social conditions, including stigmatizing stereotypes, that create or worsen the problem of focus, and (2) to improve outside organizations attempting to help people with the problem, such as health or helping bureaucracies (Gussow and Tracy, 1976; Katz and Bender, 1976; Kurtz, 1990). Droghe, Arnston, and Norton (1986) argue that, in some cases, nonmember reactions to the person with a problem are a major factor in the problem becoming associated with the disease or condition (such as epilepsy or being an amputee). Self-help GAs comprising parents of children with a particular problem, such as a serious disease, are likely to take this approach (Chesler, 1991). Groups can take the internal therapeutic approach and the external sociopolitical advocacy approach *simultaneously*. If they adopt the latter principally, they create more a kind of social-movement GA than the kind of self-help GA of main interest in this article (Chesler, 1991; Katz and Bender, 1976).

Youth Character Development GAs

A particular impact on membership is evident in GAs engaged in youth-character development. These organizations fall into two main types: branches of national associations (Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Campfire Girls, YMCA, YWCA, 4-H) and extracurricular GAs associated with high schools and colleges. There is little research to show these GAs have a character-building impact on members (as opposed to stimulating later GA participation), but qualitative data suggest that this impact probably takes place to some extent. Effectiveness in these groups has been even less studied.

Some probable elements of effectiveness, however, are recruitment of new members through existing members, structure that emphasizes face-to-face interaction and the rewards of solidarity, fostering of internal social cohesion through member sociability and entertainment activities to some degree, recruitment of peer members who are comfortable with and attracted to each other as similar people, encouragement of high levels of participation and reasonably frequent meetings (often weekly) that involve much exposure of members to the group and its influence on their personalities,

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development of some group prestige so that youth are attracted to membership, and group persistence over years.

Other factors fostering member impact seem to be local socio-political support or sponsorship (Quinn and Kunz, 1972), presence of a character-development or other ideology of some sort that justifies group activities, promotion of an altered consciousness to some extent (for example, a Boy Scout is supposed to be more moral and honorable than nonmember boys), assignment of responsibilities to members with the expectation of competent performance (some non-school youth GAs, like scouting, have an official rank system), a hierarchy of responsibility and leadership by youth members, emphasis on interdependent small-group activities as well as individual achievement, rewards and public recognition for good performance, and guidance by one or more adult advisors or leaders who nonetheless let the youth members take principal responsibility as far as is feasible (less so for younger children under ten, as in Cub Scouts or Brownies). These suggestions come from participant observation of some such youth GAs, reading of relevant documents published by the national coordinating office of the GA, and reading of some extant scholarly documents (Atkins, 1969; MacLeod, 1983; Quinn and Kurz, 1972; Reck, 1951; Scott, 1965; Smith, 1990).

Grassroots Associations in General

Several studies have examined how GA participation in general, across many types of groups, has an impact on members. These studies often find some impact of GAs on participating members (Smith and Reddy, 1973), especially on their subsequent political participation (Baumgartner and Walker, 1988; Olsen, 1982; Verba and Nie, 1972), even in longitudinal studies (Hanks, 1981; Hanks and Eckland, 1978). To foster this kind of member impact, GAs in general need to emphasize advocacy and involvement in public affairs whenever relevant, rather than ducking important local or supralocal political matters affecting the GA. GAs also need to openly seek help from members and leaders in dealing with such matters.

Another broad type of GA internal impact reviewed in Smith (in press) is social support. This kind of impact is trebly important, for it (1) fosters social cohesion in the society and community as well as (2) generates happiness or life satisfaction as well as (3) generates health and survival, two second order kinds of impact. Social support is made more likely in GAs because of their tendency toward member homogeneity, which makes for greater friendship formation (McPherson and Smith-Lovin, 1987). GAs seeking more social support impact thus should monitor and encourage member homogeneity. Once similar people have become members, GAs should plan activities that permit friendships as well as acquaintanceships to form. Sociability periods before and after meetings and perhaps as intermissions, for example, are not a waste of time. Instead, they can

be seen as opportunities to build group cohesion and internal social support. Note that a GA's members may be peers on one dimension mainly, such as being obese or interested in ecological balance, while being potentially very different on other dimensions such as age, sex, social class, political interests, etc. This kind of member diversity makes many GAs selectively peer-homogeneous rather than pervasively peer-homogeneous, and allows many kinds of people to join such a selectively peer-homogeneous GA.

Conclusion

Given that a grassroots group has been formed (the initial requirement; Smith, 1967), impact on its members is fostered if it

1. Recruits mainly peer members (people with a common problem, interest, physiology, or social background), leading to substantial homogeneity
2. Involves members in relatively frequent face-to-face interaction in meetings and other group activities
3. Promotes high member participation levels or mobilization within the group
4. Creates high internal cohesion and solidarity among the members, providing fellowship and social support to members
5. Develops an effective ideology explaining the situation of the members and what the group does to improve this situation, thus providing purposive incentives to members
6. Persists over time (at least one or two years) so that its goals can be achieved at least gradually in causing change in its members

The foregoing six factors seem to be quite important for effectiveness in *either* internal or external impact. Many additional factors are discussed in Smith (in press). The next three factors seem specific to effectiveness for *internal impact*:

7. Maintains member impact as a basic and central goal, without shifting substantially to advocacy or service
8. Uses encapsulation to reduce external influences on members until they undergo substantial change and hence are relatively insulated against outside influences
9. Provides an acceptable new consciousness and new identity as a central root of member impact

The bases for finding the first six elements of effectiveness in both lists above to be the same, and even the basis for finding commonality within external-impact GAs in such elements, lies in the structure and operations of GAs generally. Whatever the kind of GA, its success is enhanced by having peer members who feel relatively similar on at least one significant dimension, preferably more. GAs

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are by nature exclusive, and a common characteristic or common interest makes this exclusivity work, especially when it comes to sharing experiences and feelings relevant to member change. Peer members make face-to-face interaction more productive of lasting social relationships, and these in turn make it more likely that cohesion develops. Solidarity in GAs grows out of personal interaction and similarity, not simple humanity. The similarity, though, can be as minimal as a common interest—or as central to life as a terminal disease or lifelong physiological, behavioral, or personal problem shared with others.

Without substantial participation, members are not caught up in the web of activities and relationships of the GA. At one extreme, if “official members” or members “on paper only” (Smith, 1972) never participate, the group has no impact on them in most cases. At the other extreme, members who are deeply involved and participate highly in the GA are more exposed to all the change-producing facets of the group and more likely to be affected by its cohesion, social relationships, ideology, encapsulation, and new identity for members.

A well-developed ideology helps any kind of GA attain its goals more effectively, because humans are in part rational beings who like to understand *why* they are doing what they are socially expected to do. GA ideologies speak to this human need for rationality, especially in a group where what is being asked of members may sometimes seem irrational, silly, or useless on its face and therefore needful of explanation to most participants. A well-developed GA ideology is also a defense for members against skeptical nonmembers who may try to ridicule or tear down the commitment of members to their group.

Finally, any kind of change sought by a GA tends to require time if it is to be accomplished. People seldom change their personalities and long-time perspectives, habits, or belief systems overnight. Member change takes time. Thus, GAs usually need at least a year or two to have an impact (but not always; GA cults can have far quicker results), so persistence is one key to GA internal effectiveness.

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