

# Helping People Stay Accountable to Group Agreements

One of the most common sources of conflict in community occurs when people don't do what they say they'll do. This often causes repercussions "downstream," since some people count on others to finish certain preliminary steps before they can take the next steps. By putting a few simple processes in place, people can help each other stay accountable to one another in relatively painless, guilt-free ways.

- Make agreements about tasks in meetings, and keep track of these tasks from meeting to meeting. Assign tasks to specific people and define what they're being asked to accomplish and by what time. Task review at the beginning of every meeting—the people or committees who agreed to take on these tasks report whether they have been done, and if not, when they will be.

- Create a wall chart of assigned tasks with expected completion dates and the person or committee responsible for each. Someone keeps the chart current.

- Create a buddy system, where everyone is assigned another group member to call and courteously inquire, "Did you call the county yet?" or "Have you found out about the health permit?" This is not about guilt-tripping; it's about helpful inquiry and mutual encouragement.

These methods rely on the principle that it's more difficult to forget or ignore responsibilities if they're publicly visible. When the "community eye" is on you. Social pressure can often accomplish what good intentions cannot.

If not completing tasks becomes an ongoing problem with one or more people in the group, you can add additional processes.

- When someone accomplishes a task, thank and acknowledge them at the next meeting.
- When someone doesn't accomplish a task, the group as a whole asks the person to try again. After awhile, the simple desire not to let others down usually becomes an internalized motivator for more responsible behavior.

If this doesn't work, use a graduated series of consequences. (*See handout*).

Why is this such a common source of community conflict? Developing the habit early in life of procrastinating or agreeing to take on more than is possible, and not having enough motivation to change. When we live alone or live with our families, it's relatively easy to change our minds about whether or not, or when, we'll do something we said we'd do, or just plain let it go. But in community, this can have widespread negative impacts on other people, and we'll hear about it. It can take time, energy, and commitment to shift from "live-alone" or "single-family" mode to consistently considering how our actions will affect others.

When people repeatedly don't do their tasks and others continue to hold them accountable, it usually results in the person either changing their habits or eventually leaving the group.