

Characteristics of Successful Organizations

Through the survey administered for the Foundation study, experts from a variety of backgrounds in the environmental field identified a number of characteristics of successful environmental organizations – those prepared to face the challenge of protecting Hawai‘i’s environment. This section of the report provides a summary of characteristics embodied by successful non-governmental organizations and community-led groups in environmental protection. It also includes a brief section on measuring the success of organizations engaged in environmental protection efforts.

Clear & Compelling Mission

Successful organizations have identifiable and bounded missions with clearly articulated goals. It is important to have a compelling mission that can be locally implemented. The mission of an organization should resonate with a larger audience, be it local community, state, or global. It was often stated by respondents that it’s important to have a globally consistent goal, but “act locally.” In addition, respondents stated that successful organizations should be transparent and “results oriented,” building on the momentum of sequential, successful projects.

High Capacity

Capacity comes in several forms: people, money, and ability to leverage both. In terms of people, it was often stated that successful organizations have the “right” board members and staff; people who have strong leadership qualities, charismatic personalities, local connections and, ultimately, are task-oriented. Also, core staffing is critical to managing projects; grant dollars and other income, and, very importantly, the volunteers themselves. More long term funding is needed to avoid the issue of paid staff spending “all their time fundraising” and not working on the project directly. Although organizations may often depend on volunteerism, effective organizations require paid staff, including volunteer coordinators, managers, and people working on the ground.

“Staying Power”

Along with the importance of a strong leader to build “high capacity” (over time) – there is another definition of leadership that was noted by several respondents. That is, to pass leadership from one generation to the next. This requires internship and mentorship programs, as well as general capacity building of an organization over time. A strong and lasting organization is one that persists past the agenda and tenure of any one particular person.

Partnerships and Collaborative Initiatives

In recognizing organizational limitations, it is important to build strong partnerships to “fill the gap” and work for mutually supportive goals. One of the areas in which respondents most often discussed this concept is in obtaining, understanding, and utilizing scientific information. Successful organizations work with scientists to inform project outcomes. This can also be thought of as a “co-management model” where multiple organizations and agencies offer supportive resources to achieve a shared goal.

Public/Private Partnerships

Organizations such as the Watershed Partnerships are achieving success through collaboration with private landowners. They focus on building relationships while recognizing that the stakeholders may have different objectives. Regardless, they have discovered that many share the same values of preservation and sustainability. Through these relationships, the message can be delivered in non-threatening methods such as plans and management principles rather than regulations. It was stated that this represents a “partnership of equals.”

Through these partnerships, it was discovered that landowners often want to do what is right in terms of land management, but don’t always have the resources and expertise to manage large-scale invasive species removal, weed control, and fencing needs. The public/private partnerships provide the mechanism needed to engage landowners and perform conservation initiatives on private land with the expertise and funding from outside sources.

Evaluation

Assessing the success of an organization should occur through multiple lenses: physical outcomes, engagement, and process. In addition, time periods for assessment should be reflective to the task at hand – primarily meaning that large-scale environmental change often happens slowly.

The impacts of projects to physical environmental outcomes are often best measured by quantitative assessments of environmental baselines and change. Common environmental indicators include: the number of endangered species, the number of impaired habitats, acres of land under conservation, the number of ungulates removed, the amount of fish species, and changes in coral and algae cover. These are tangible results that can be quantified or qualified according to consistent processes of measurement, thus becoming

proxies for ecosystem health. In addition, indicators must be tracked over time in order to assess the success or impact of a project.

Monitoring of ecological factors is not the only way, however, to assess environmental objectives. Interviewees recommend that monitoring people's actions and behaviors can also yield significant information for evaluating success. Monitoring participation rates and critical mass will provide a measure of success in terms of the level of education and influence a program delivers. Both qualitative and quantitative measures on management actions can be employed to provide a more accurate assessment of success.

Because changes in environmental outcomes often occur slowly, measurements need to be taken from a long-term standpoint. Thus, interviewees emphasized the need for success to be based not only on the outcome, but also the process by which it is achieved. Process metrics such as transparency, inclusion of key stakeholders and the broader community, and ability to decide things in a democratic manner can be incorporated into the assessment of success.

One respondent said that, "the goal is to achieve the greatest amount of protection with the fewest number of management actions," thereby leading to efficient project implementation. It is often difficult to attribute an outcome to management activities because causal relationships are not easily defined. As a result, several respondents said that complex measurement often fails to provide substantive results. Respondents encourage measurement based on obtainable data and well-defined relationships. This also serves to minimize barriers to monitoring and evaluation reporting.