Giving Support to Group Members

One of the most common needs expressed by active citizens and members of citizen groups is the need for support. Social change projects often involve challenging and stressful activities.

It makes sense that people who are committed to completing social change projects would want to support one another in order to cushion the difficulties and make it easier to experience the satisfactions of the work they do together.

The 1st step in building a more supportive climate in a social change project is to identify the ways in which members of the project most appreciate receiving support. **Ask each member of your project to share the 2 or 3 kinds of support they most appreciate (from the list set out below or others they might think of):**

__ 1. Receiving sincere praise about things I am doing well.
__ 2. Someone who will listen to problems I encounter.
__ 3. Someone who helps me "think out loud" about challenges I am facing.
__ 4. Getting honest, straightforward feedback about things other project members think I am doing wrong in the project.
__ 5. People offering to help me out.
__ 6. Project members who see me clearly; for example, who see that I am doing the best I can and who help me build on my strengths rather than simply reminding me of my weaknesses.
__ 7. People who stand up for me when others criticize me behind my back.
__ 8. Project members who understand what its like to be under pressure and who will stick with me when the pressure is on.
__ 9. People who respect and like me for who I am and not just for what I do.
__10. Project members who expect the best from me in an encouraging way.
__11. Project members who have a sense of humour or who encourage me to relax.

Becoming aware of our own and each other's needs for support often leads to other ways of building a more supportive climate in a group.

Citizen groups have experimented with a variety of such methods because they improve the functioning of the group, make it easier to encourage members to take on special responsibilities and leadership roles, and they help build a positive spirit in the group.

Here are some widely used methods of support:

1. **Make a habit of respecting and valuing any person who takes on special responsibilities.** Look for ways to show appreciation for the extra burdens these people shoulder.
2. **Develop a policy of interrupting put-downs of any member.** This tends to help people feel more comfortable in the group and more willing to share their ideas.
3. **Take time out to tell each other what we like and admire about each other.** This can feel a bit awkward at first, and the fact is our society generally encourages us to freely criticize each other and only rarely say positive things. Yet the great majority of people respond much better to compliments than to criticism.
4. **Have activities that encourage project members to get to know each other outside of project work** such as parties, meeting outdoors occasionally when the weather is nice, getting together for lunch or over coffee. It's easier to be supportive of people when you know something about them.