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Strategies for Environmental Change: Developing NGO-Company Partnerships for Success

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Presentation Abstract

In the history of the environmental movement, nonprofit groups have used a wide array of techniques to advocate for positive environmental change. These tactics have ranged from litigation to lobbying, public education, scientific research, and visible public protest. One tool for change, pioneered by the Environmental Defense Fund, is voluntary, cooperative projects with for-profit corporations.

To capitalize on the potential for change in the approach of the business community to issues of concern to environmentalists, the Alliance for Environmental Innovation (Alliance) was founded as a joint project of the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) and the Pew Charitable Trusts (Pew) in 1994. The Alliance's projects seek to create environmentally aggressive initiatives that also generate business benefits, such as increased revenues or reduced costs. In this way, incentives for further progress are internalized within the companies' operations.

To date, the Alliance has focused on the consumer products, retail, and services sectors. Work with leading companies in these areas provides maximum leverage for our work. Millions of people use the products and rely on the services of companies like SC Johnson, Starbucks, UPS, Dell, Clairol and McDonald's every day. Environmental changes made by them have beneficial repercussions throughout their supply chains. Action taken by market leaders often leads their competitors to follow suit.

We have found that the design and start-up phase of a cooperative project requires a significant investment of time and resources, but it is time well spent in terms of future payoffs. The start-up period often begins with the initial contact between the advocacy group and a company, but may continue for many months as both sides evaluate the resources required, the potential for environmental results, and the risks in undertaking a cooperative venture. This phase, however, also enables the partners to get to know each other, build common expectations about the project, and commit sufficient resources to it. In our Alliance projects, signing a memorandum of agreement marks the end of this start-up period and the beginning of the formal project—even if some work has already begun.

As each company is distinct and each project design unique, the execution phase of a project can follow several courses that are difficult or impossible to predict. The steps necessary to keep a project focused and results-oriented vary, depending on the pace of the project, the effectiveness of the teamwork, and the nature of the emerging outcomes.

It is essential that project teams are influential within the partner company. Project teams that include members from key departments in a company are often successful because they provide company-wide accountability and participation, tap the varied expertise and experience within a company, and educate more people about the project and its goals, while minimizing the challenges of bringing people on board once the project is under way. The participation of senior management or mid-level employees who have the ear of senior management and are empowered to deliver results can be a powerful asset to the project.

While we have found that work plans continually change in the course of projects, developing an initial work plan serves several functions. It enables each party to communicate its expectations about project tasks and anticipated results. The team can better determine personnel and financial needs, establish a timeline, understand the sequence and relative priority of the various tasks required to carry out the project, and assign the appropriate resources for their completion. The work plan can be changed or modified to maintain the momentum of the project.

In most cases, environmental initiatives will only sustain themselves and grow within a company when they deliver specific, measurable business benefits, particularly with regard to a company's core business functions. In our experience, therefore, business analysis must be done concurrently with the environmental analysis, with company staff providing the necessary information about the company's business operations. Ideas that are unrealistic or impractical may have to be tabled, while other ideas may emerge as winners for the customer, shareholder, and the environment.

The strategies presented here and the lessons learned from our cooperative partnership work with companies are described in more detail in the Alliance's recent publication, *Catalyzing Environmental Results: Lessons in Advocacy Organization- Business Partnerships* and can be found on our website www.edfpewalliance.org