Core Group & Other Volunteers

Objectives

To familiarize you with the decision-making body of the Project, the Core Group, as well as other volunteers who are not part of the Core Group. Both the Core Group and the non-Core Group volunteers are essential Core Elements of the Mpowerment Project.

What you’ll find in the Appendix to this module:
- Figure 5.1 Sample Core Group agendas for the first 4 meetings
- Figure 5.2 Sample Volunteer Interest Sheets
- Figure 5.3 Sample Icebreaker Exercises
- Figure 5.4 Facilitation Skills-Building Tips
- Figure 5.5 Brainstorming Skills-Building Tips
- Figure 5.6 Conflict Management Skills-Building Tips
- Figure 5.7 Sample Core Group Agendas for established Core Groups
- Figure 5.8 Sample Core Group Planning “Check List”
4 Main Ground Rules

- confidentiality
- use “I” statements
- mutual respect
- have fun!
Core Group members are volunteers, as are the other volunteers of the Project. Much of what is discussed in the second major section of this module, Volunteers, also pertains to Core Group members. Therefore, it will be helpful to read the section on Volunteers in order to get a more complete understanding of the Core Group.

The Core Group is the decision-making body of the Project that designs and carries out all Project activities. Usually it is comprised of 12 to 20 young gay/bisexual men, depending upon the size of the community (with fewer Core Group members in a smaller community, and more in a larger, more diverse community). The Core Group’s role is to:

- analyze the problems and dilemmas that young gay/bisexual men face in their community,
- strategize how to address those problems through Project activities,
- implement solutions to the problems, and
- analyze if the strategies are successful.

The Core Group is also a key part of the process of diffusing messages and norms about safer sex and HIV testing to social networks throughout the young gay/bisexual men’s community. In addition to HIV/AIDS, problems and dilemmas facing young men include where to meet other young men besides bars, the lack of safe places to socialize, a lack of community, challenges involved in having safer sex, how young gay/bisexual men treat each other, homophobia in the community and internalized homophobia by the young men themselves, how to maintain healthy boyfriend relationships, and so forth.
The Core Group analyzes if the Project goals and the goals of the activities are being met.

The Core Group analyzes and considers the causes of these issues, and then it designs and implements activities that might be solutions. These solutions can involve developing Social Outreach Events (see Module 7: Formal Outreach—Social Outreach Events and Outreach Teams) and conducting safer sex promotional outreach. Possible solutions also include helping to ensure that M-groups are conducted, developing appealing and interesting safer sex materials, and developing and disseminating publicity materials for the Project. The Core Group analyzes if the Project goals and the goals of the activities are being met. For example, did a Social Outreach event attract diverse groups of young men and was safer sex promoted? Did it get men to think more about how to maintain healthy boyfriend relationships and how safer sex enters into such relationships? After reflecting on whether or not the goals of the event have been met, the Core Group then plans other activities and capitalizes on the lessons learned.

This approach of focusing on problems and dilemmas, and then striving to create solutions, is a key part of community organizing and empowerment. Organizing and creating a stronger, healthier young gay/bisexual men’s community is a key goal of this Project. Importantly, successful community organizers focus on “winnable wins”—addressing problems that one can potentially change successfully, and this is also the approach used in the Mpowerment Project. Focusing on winnable wins gives the Core Group a sense of accomplishment and empowerment, as opposed to trying to address major social problems that are important but difficult to alter. Therefore, the Core Group tends to focus on concrete, local issues—while always keeping a focus on HIV prevention—rather than on issues that are more difficult to achieve, such as changing the laws of the country to support same-sex marriage. Men who want to focus on the larger issues are supported in their endeavors, but the Project tends to work on more achievable goals, while weaving HIV prevention into all activities.

Most of the Mpowerment Project’s Guiding Principles pertain to the Core Group. Two of its Guiding Principles are that the Project is peer run and peer designed, and that it empowers the young men involved in the Project. The Core Group meets both criteria because it makes important decisions about running the Project, and because it is directly involved with decision-making and continual analysis based on the Project’s goals. The Guiding Principle of diffusing the messages of HIV prevention throughout the young men’s community is achieved by ensuring that the Core Group has representatives from diverse social networks.

This module describes how to establish a Core Group, its purpose, and how its work helps to implement the Project’s Guiding Principles. As with all of the Mpowerment Project’s Core Elements, adaptations to the Core Group model should involve careful consideration of the Guiding Principles.
Assembling and renewing a Core Group

In order to have an Mpowerment Project that can reach broadly into diverse segments of the young gay/bisexual men’s community, it is important that the Core Group’s composition reflects the Project’s target population. Every community has substantial diversity, with many subgroups or segments. An effective Core Group should strive to include many men from each of the major segments of young gay/bisexual men that exist in the community. Before assembling a Core Group for the first time, or when needing to renew a Core Group by attracting new members, the Coordinators should conduct a community assessment. This is one of the very first steps to start up the Project, but it is also helpful to do if the size of the Core Group needs to be increased. (See Module 2: Community Assessment for more information on the community assessment.)
Results from the community assessment will help guide the Coordinators in deciding who to recruit to the group. Diversity is a key consideration. Having a diverse Core Group ensures that the Project represents a broad variety of ideas and perspectives, and a diverse Core Group helps create a broad base of support for the Project within the community. As we state throughout this manual, diversity not only means men from different ethnic/racial groups, but also from diverse socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, different social networks, and so forth.

In addition to considering diversity issues, it is also helpful to recruit young men into the Core Group who have leadership qualities, and who are popular within the different segments of the young gay/bisexual men’s community. Men whose behavior and opinions influence other young men and who know many other young gay/bisexual men will be extremely helpful as Core Group members. Since the Core Group (including the Coordinators) is the starting point for the diffusion process (one of the Guiding Principles), it is helpful if its members are respected by others and have a number of friends to whom they can spread the messages of practicing safer sex, getting tested for HIV, and creating a supportive community. In addition, these men can endorse the Project, and tell other young men in the community that this is an exciting program, that its activities are interesting and trendy, and that it’s worth joining this community of young gay/bisexual men.

While it is important to have popular men as members of the Core Group, it is also important not to exclude anyone who wants to be a part of this group. More help is always needed, and excluding men will cause the Project to be perceived as cliquish.

Membership in the Core Group will change over time. Some men stay in the Core Group for a long time, while others leave after serving only briefly. It is not necessarily a problem if some men decide that they do not enjoy participating in the Core Group and therefore stop participating in it. Given the amount of time and reflection that is required of Core Group members, many men may decide they would rather volunteer in some other capacity. However, it is important for the Project Coordinators to understand the reasons why young men stop attending Core Group meetings, since these may provide helpful feedback to the Coordinators. For this reason, we recommend following up with former Core Group members to find out why they left the group and to get their suggestions for ways to improve the Project. New volunteers will need to be recruited on an ongoing basis to keep its membership between 12 and 20 men.
Motivations for joining the Core Group

What motivates young men to want to be part of the Core Group, especially since it takes a considerable amount of time and energy? Keeping this in mind will increase your success in building and maintaining the group.

First, a major motivation to participate in the Core Group is that it provides an opportunity to meet and socialize with other young men. Since the social aspect of the Project is a prime motivator for many young men (and therefore is a Guiding Principle), it is important from the outset to include time for socializing and team building among Core Group members. For example, sometimes Core Group members choose to go out dancing together on a Saturday night. Some Core Groups have made it a regular practice of going out to a cafe together following their meetings. Building such opportunities into the Project helps to keep young men involved.

Second, granting decision-making power to the Core Group members is very motivating. This contributes to the strong sense of ownership Core Group members feel for the program, which translates into a willingness to commit their time to Project activities. It can be far more rewarding to work on a program when you have a strong voice in it than if you are only carrying out someone else’s decisions, or if you only have very limited power in deciding what the program will do. Again, this sort of empowerment is one of the Guiding Principles of the program.

Third, having an opportunity to help their community is highly motivating for some men, and the Project goals of community-building and HIV prevention offer multiple opportunities to become involved in these areas. Core Group members get to plan and carry out activities to prevent HIV infection among their peers, support friends to get tested for HIV, and support friends to follow up with medical care if they have HIV. For other men, helping their community by reducing the sense of isolation that many young gay/bisexual men experience is motivating, and thus they welcome the opportunity to actively create new social outlets for young men.

Facilitating Core Group Meetings

The Coordinators typically facilitate Core Group meetings, although skilled volunteers may also fulfill this role or co-facilitate meetings. As described in Module 4: Coordinators, it is important for the Coordinators to have effective group facilitation skills. If they have never gone through group facilitation training, they should obtain such training as soon as possible after they are hired. (See Figure 5.4 in the Appendix to this module for facilitation skills-building tips.)
The Coordinators are both Core Group members and facilitators of the Core Group. When a Coordinator is acting in the role of facilitator, it is best if he tries to remain neutral on issues that are discussed by the group. For example, if a discussion is occurring about an upcoming event, the facilitator should not be interjecting his views about it. However, it is definitely appropriate for him to pose questions to the group to get them to think through the consequences of any actions they are considering taking. If a topic arises that a Coordinator wants to be able to contribute input to, it is best if he surrenders the role of facilitator to another Coordinator while he does so.

It is important for the Coordinators to have effective group facilitation skills.

Skills-building and shared M-group experience for Core Group members

Although there is no formal training or orientation for Core Group members, it is strongly recommended that all of them attend an M-group. If all Core Group members share the experience of participating in an M-group, then everyone on the Project starts at the same place in terms of their knowledge about many key elements of the Project: its goals, safer sex behavior and knowing one’s own HIV status, conducting informal outreach to friends, and an understanding of the link between building community and supporting friends to have safer sex.

When the M-group facilitators (the Project Coordinators) are first learning how to facilitate groups, they can conduct “practice groups” with Core Group members. This accomplishes two things: the Coordinators are able to get needed practice as group facilitators, and Core Group members experience being in an M-group. Thereafter, whenever someone is interested in joining the Core Group, they should be signed up for an M-group as soon as possible.
In addition, young men from economically or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds may need some additional support in order to assume a leadership role in the community. If the Core Group has many members who have never before participated in a “formal” group, it may be very helpful to provide a training in facilitation skills for the entire Core Group. Learning facilitation skills will make it easier for them to participate in Core Group meetings, and also to facilitate both the group and team or subcommittee meetings. In addition, Core Group members are likely to benefit from learning about approaches to conflict resolution, new computer skills (e.g., Word, Excel, graphic arts software), places they can go in the community to obtain a GED, and information on attending college and obtaining scholarships. As discussed in Module 11: Community Advisory Boards, the CAB may be able to attend some Core Group meetings and provide life skills trainings on such things as how to balance a checkbook, apply for a job, dress appropriately for a job interview, and keep a job.

Teams

Carrying out Project activities involves many tasks and details, and the Core Group can delegate these responsibilities to teams or committees of volunteers instead of trying to tackle every issue itself. For this reason, Projects have often formed the following teams:

**Outreach Team.** This team is in charge of coming up with a way to promote safer sex throughout the community and weave safer sex promotion into Project events.

**Social Outreach Events Team.** This team is in charge of planning all the Project’s large Social Outreach Events, as well as other Project activities.

During its meetings, the Core Group reviews and gives feedback on each team’s ideas and plans. For example, the Outreach Team may present to the Core Group their ideas about conducting outreach at an upcoming event. The Core Group then discusses their ideas and offers feedback. The Outreach Team then incorporates the Core Group’s suggestions into their plans and proceeds with the event. Likewise, if the Outreach Team is developing ideas for a safer sex promotional piece or an invitation to an outreach event, they also present these ideas to the Core Group. Following the Core Group’s feedback, the Outreach Team then produces the materials.

Often Core Group members will also be a member of a team, and this overlap provides useful continuity. This structure leaves the details to the individual teams, and allows the Core Group to focus on larger issues. By not having to worry about the details of events—which may not be of interest to everyone in the Core Group anyway—the Core Group is able to cover a number of different topics at each meeting. Typically teams will meet during the week, work on their tasks, present what they’ve done at the next Core Group meeting, and solicit feedback and ideas from the Core Group.
Core Group meetings

**Frequency and location of Core Group meetings** Core Groups function most efficiently when they meet weekly. Evening meetings generally work best since many Core Group members are students or hold day jobs. Meetings are generally held at the Project space, the physical center where the Project holds most of its outreach events.

**Food** It is important to serve food at Core Group meetings because—surprise, surprise!—people like to eat when they get together. The type and amount of food depends on the Project budget, as well as community expectations. Some Projects provide substantial meals before Core Group meetings, while others offer light refreshments (juice, soda, chips, crackers, and cookies). Some Projects hold potluck dinners where Core Group members bring dishes to share at the meetings. Depending on when Core Group meetings occur, it is important to recognize that Core Group members may be giving up their dinner hour to attend the Core Group, so having something to eat is important.

**Mpowerment Project ground rules** The Project ground rules or agreements (see list below) are reviewed each time the Core Group meets, as well as at M-group meetings. They should also be displayed in the Mpowerment Project space. It is fine to rephrase them to make them more culturally appropriate to the group of men that the Project is targeting. At the beginning of each meeting, a Core Group member typically reviews the ground rules and describes what they mean to him. Coordinators can then add any points that the volunteer may have left out. The four main ground rules are:

- **Confidentiality**
- **Use “I” statements**
- **Mutual respect**
- **Have fun!**

"Confidentiality" means that private and sensitive information revealed during a meeting is not repeated outside of the meeting without permission from the person who shared it. Or paraphrasing this agreement, what is said in the room stays in the room. While the Core Group members are encouraged to tell people about the Project, they should not share anyone’s personal information with others. This is important to emphasize.
at every meeting because many men are concerned that their “business” will be shared with others.

**“Use ‘I’ statements”** means that each Core Group member discusses what he feels about a topic, rather than speaking in general terms about what most people think or trying to impose his values and opinions on someone else. Core Group members should be encouraged to use statements like “I think” or “I feel” when communicating their opinions.

**“Mutual respect”** means listening to others in a respectful manner, regardless of whether one agrees with their views or not. It is natural to disagree sometimes, especially given that Core Group members come from different backgrounds and have different life experiences. However, all points of view are valid. By respecting others, this creates a safe environment so Core Group members feel comfortable expressing differing opinions. Being mutually respectful also means not talking while others are talking.

**“Have fun!”** means that the Project’s activities should be fun and enjoyable. The work we are doing is important, but be careful not to become overly serious while doing it.

**Socializing before and/or after Core Group meetings**

Scheduling a half-hour of time for socializing before the Core Group gets started creates a relaxed atmosphere and a sense of community. Playing music definitely creates an upbeat mood. The socializing can be considered the period of time when the meeting is advertised as beginning until the time the meeting is actually called to order. This period of time also allows leeway for travel time, the inevitable straggling member, last minute errands, etc.

During this time it is important for the Coordinators to welcome each person who shows up to the meeting and mix with all the men (which means that any preparations for the Core Group meeting should be done prior to this). The Coordinators can express their appreciation for the Core Group members coming to the meeting, talk to the new people, catch up with the regulars, introduce them to each other, and sparkle and be charming. This is also an excellent way for new volunteers to get involved. Two or three Core Group members can form a welcoming committee to make sure that new people get introduced around. Be sure to ask new men how they heard about the Project and keep notes on this, as the information may guide future outreach efforts.

After accomplishing the business of the meeting, many men like to continue socializing for a while afterwards. This unstructured social time is important for team building among the Core Group members. It relates to the Guiding Principle of developing a stronger and healthier community as young gay/bisexual men create larger social networks of friends who support each other about having safer sex and knowing their HIV status. It also relates to the
Guiding Principle of meeting young gay/bisexual men’s social needs. In fact, the socializing aspect of Core Group meetings is often a bigger motivation for participating than the “business” aspect of the meeting. Turning music back on after the meeting lets everyone know that the meeting is officially over, and it also creates a relaxed, fun, and social atmosphere during which Coordinators can circulate through the group to make sure that no one feels isolated or left out. Having people stay and socialize after the meeting provides opportunities for:

- Core Group members to get to know each other better and develop friendships
- Conducting informal outreach by encouraging each other to be safe sexually, to get tested, and to support peers in doing both
- Men to talk to the Coordinators
- Recruiting men for M-groups
- Making referrals to other services
- It also provides a chance for those men who missed the social time before the meeting to meet and talk with the other Core Group members

Occasionally some men only attend the Core Group to socialize and do not necessarily enjoy or contribute to the Core Group activities. These men should be encouraged to attend other Mpowerment Project activities instead, such as the weekly video nights or discussion groups, or simply to come to the Project space after the Core Group meetings have ended.

We cannot overemphasize the importance of having music playing when men arrive for Core Group meetings. As mentioned before, people often feel more comfortable and relaxed when they are in a space with music playing. Having
music playing also improves the atmosphere by making the inevitable lulls in conversation less ominous. Play fun, popular music that young guys listen to. Taking over the choice of music before and after Core Group meetings also provides an opportunity for a music-savvy Core Group member to get more involved.

**Take Minutes at the meeting**

At each Core Group meeting ask someone to take minutes. This can be a job that a volunteer routinely takes on. Typing the minutes directly into a laptop computer facilitates emailing them out to the Core Group or posting them to the Project’s website, and to its pages on websites such as Facebook and MySpace. It also eliminates the need to type them out afterwards. Including the date in the file title is helpful for easy record keeping (but don’t forget to also include the year of the meeting). A complete copy of the minutes should be filed in the Project office after the meeting.

**Preparing for Core Group meetings and developing a preliminary agenda**

The importance of planning the meeting

Having productive and well functioning meetings is one of the keys to a successful Core Group, and preparing for good meetings is simple and doesn’t take much time. No one wants to come to meetings that are dry and boring—not even Coordinators. Meetings that are disorganized and unproductive are also a major source of frustration to Core Group members, who are volunteering their valuable time to the Project. One agency we worked with watched its Core Group die after many weeks of pointless discussion about creating bylaws. Tasks that don’t contribute to community-building and a sense of fun can frustrate members and can lead to the group’s failure. The easiest way to avoid these common pitfalls is to make sure that meetings are well planned. Below are the steps we’ve seen used to great success in Mpowerment Projects.

Meet beforehand to plan the meeting

We strongly suggest that the Coordinators meet before the Core Group meeting to create a preliminary agenda. Setting a preliminary agenda rather than a final one embodies the Project’s guiding principle to empower participants by giving them a voice in planning. At the beginning of each meeting, the Core Group is then given the opportunity to revise and approve the final agenda. If a Project has only one Coordinator, then it is recommended he meet either with the Project Supervisor or with one or more key Core Group members to get input on the preliminary agenda.

Including Core Group members in the planning of meetings helps volunteers feel they have a vital role in decisions made about the Project. In planning for the Core Group meeting, it’s a good idea to review minutes from the last meeting to see if there are any important details that need following up. **(See**
During planning for the Core Group meeting, it’s a good idea to review minutes from the last meeting to see if there are any important details that need following up.

**Items to include on the agenda**

Sometimes running the Mpowerment Project can seem like a juggling act that requires keeping many balls in the air simultaneously, and this fact impacts the agenda. Trying to focus on many issues simultaneously sometimes results in Core Group meetings that feel more like staff meetings than a vital component of empowerment and community-building. The goal of Core Group meetings is not just to have volunteers give status reports on the work they’ve been doing, to assign tasks, or to think of more work for everyone to do! While these are all important tasks, it’s best to avoid letting them dominate Core Group meetings. Instead, we recommend that Core Group members spend time at the beginning of every meeting working together on a team building exercise—something that will help everyone get to know each other just a little bit better. (See Figure 5.3. in the Appendix to this module for a list of sample icebreaker exercises.)

It is important to review the ground rules at every Core Group meeting. MPower in Albuquerque started every meeting with an icebreaker and a special review of the ground rules, after which they would light a candle. This symbolically reinforced the idea of observing the ground rules during the Core Group meeting.

Spending time reflecting on the overall functioning of the Project is of critical importance, as is a review of each of the Core Elements. For example, periodically it is helpful to devote time during the meetings to discuss how informal outreach is progressing among the men attending Core Group so that they continue to support each other to have safer sex and to know their current HIV status. Another extremely valuable agenda item is to revisit the issue of why local young gay/bisexual men are still having unprotected sex, and how the Project can best address this problem. Discussing this topic at least a few times a year will help to ensure that the Project is staying relevant to the HIV prevention needs of its target population. Including an agenda item every few meetings about recruitment for M-groups is also extremely important, since the Core Group can be instrumental in finding new ways to attract young men to these groups.
In addition to the agenda items discussed above, other topics that may need regular attention include:

- Brainstorming upcoming events
- Analyzing previous events
- Recognizing and appreciating volunteers
- Generating ideas for future discussion groups
- Implementing publicity plans
- Producing and disseminating safer-sex written materials
- Recruiting new members to the Core Group, the Outreach Teams or the M-group Team
- Providing refreshments at events
- Creating next month’s calendar
- Cleaning the Project space
- Maintaining a database of participant information
- Following up with new names collected at events (e.g., to invite men to an M-group)
- Operating a website

Prepare the space for the meeting

For Coordinators, planning the agenda and being mentally prepared for the Core Group meeting is half the task—the other half is preparing the Project space for the meeting. Here are some suggestions for pre-meeting tasks:

- Clean the meeting area, sweep or vacuum the floor, pick up trash, etc.
- Refill condom bowls in the main area and in the bathroom
- Make sure the Ground Rules and calendar are posted, food or snacks are out and ready, and that music is playing in the background
- Have flip charts and markers ready
- Copy any handouts that are to be distributed

Devoting 30 minutes before the Group convenes (and before the socializing time begins) to whip the space into shape can make a huge difference in how the meetings run. If the Coordinators are running around trying to get things set up while the Core Group men are socializing, this detracts from the upbeat mood. But when all preparations are completed before the first men arrive, then the Coordinators can spend their time socializing with Core Group members, meeting new people, making introductions, and in general making everyone feel comfortable. The Coordinators can also ask a couple of volunteers to show up 15 minutes early every week to help them with last minute details. So, we strongly recommend that the Coordinators check during planning for the Core Group meeting, it’s a good idea to review minutes from the last meeting to see if there are any important details that need following up.
e-mails and finish up any paperwork before men come to the house. Again, the goal is to create a warm, welcoming, friendly environment. That may be difficult to do if the Coordinators are preoccupied with last minute tasks. (See Figure 5.8 in the Appendix to this module for a sample Core Group planning checklist that can be helpful to use before each meeting.)

**Conducting Core Group meetings**

An effective way to organize Core Group meetings is to spend about 15-30 minutes on introductions and team-building, 60 minutes on Project-related work, and 30-45 minutes discussing broader, topical issues.

At times, and particularly just before a large event, a part of the meeting can also be spent breaking into smaller groups or teams to complete urgent tasks related to the event. For instance, the Materials Team may need to finish producing a flyer in order to meet an approaching deadline, or the Outreach Team needs to make final arrangements to go to community venues to publicize an upcoming event. Alternately, a Coordinator can suggest that the volunteers get together right after the meeting to complete work on the task.

**Starting the meeting**

We recommend that Core Group meetings begin with the Coordinators asking everyone to come together. People can grab anything they want to eat or drink as they sit down. At this point, the music is turned off, and the Coordinators welcome everyone and thank them for attending the Core Group meeting.

**Introduction of coordinators**

Coordinators then introduce themselves and give a quick overview of the Project. For example, in Austin Coordinators started each Core Group meeting by reminding members that the Project is a community-building and HIV prevention program for gay/bisexual men ages 18-29. It’s also helpful to explain the Coordinator’s role in the Core Group and the Core Group’s role in the Project. For example, in Albuquerque the Coordinators typically explain that while they are the
Coordinators of the Project, they are also part of the Core Group. Doing so reminds participants that all Core Group members—including the Coordinators—have equal status in the group.

**Discussing the ground rules**  
Typically a Core Group member then states the ground rules for the meeting, in his own words. A Coordinator can add additional points that aren’t covered by the volunteer.

**Introductions and icebreakers**  
Since not everyone may know each other (or remember each other’s names), it is helpful to have introductions. Rather than simply having people go around the room and state their names, it is more personal and enjoyable to ask each man to answer a simple question, such as “What is your favorite way to relax?”, “What entertainer do you really like?”, or “If you could have a date with any celebrity, who would you choose?” Such exercises help break the ice, are fun, and provide a way for Core Group to build trust and mutual understanding. Many Projects have decided to incorporate an icebreaker exercise into the start of every Core Group meeting as a way of setting a positive tone and getting to know members better. In fact, we have noticed that even though Core Group members sometimes balk at doing “corny” exercises, meetings beginning with a team-building exercise often have less conflict and are easier to facilitate than meetings without such exercises. Core Group members can also come up with their own icebreaker each week, and facilitation of the icebreaker can be done either by a Coordinator or a Core Group member.  
*(See Figure 5.3 in the Appendix to this module for a list of sample icebreaker exercises.)*

**Review the previous week’s minutes**  
Briefly go over the minutes of the last meeting to bring people up-to-date. Remember to keep it fun. The facilitator might try to make a joke, or recall something humorous from the previous meeting. It is important that whoever facilitates the meeting not come across as stiff and formal, since that is likely to make meetings feel boring and impersonal.
The “business” issues

The facilitator then moves the group to the issues at hand: planning and carrying out activities, and analyzing the success of previous activities. It is helpful to present the preliminary agenda at this point, either on a dry-erase board or a flip chart, and ask the Core Group if there are any additional items they wish to add. Oftentimes the group’s business agenda will include brainstorming ideas for the next Social Outreach Event, making decisions about the event, assembling committees to work on it, or evaluating how an event went. Before the group moves on to a new topic, the facilitator can help members decide what the next steps are and together develop a timeline for accomplishing them.

Each Coordinator or team leader/volunteer presents his team’s progress and solicits Core Group input. When a Project is in the middle of planning a large event (like a dance party), each person in charge of a certain task is asked to report on his progress. The volunteer who is coordinating decoration, for example, talks about where that team is in the planning process. The Coordinator in charge of safer sex promotional materials might show draft materials to the group for input or approval. The Outreach Team leader talks about his team’s plans to promote safer sex during the event. This can include discussions of the most recent outreach efforts, goals for the planning of events, M-groups recruitment status, etc. One way to deal with all the work of the Project is to break into teams and have each one report back to the Core Group about their work or activities. (See Module 7: Formal Outreach—Social Outreach Events and Outreach Teams for more information on what issues to address when planning Social Outreach Events.)

Reviewing the current calendar by pointing out upcoming activities can help to encourage Core Group members to attend future events. Reviewing the calendar also provides an opportunity to publicize each event and serves as a reminder to volunteers to remember to invite their friends. Time might also be taken to plan the next month’s calendar.

Discussion of HIV/AIDS, the community and other issues

In addition to addressing business-related issues, some portion of each Core Group meeting needs to be devoted to HIV prevention-related issues. Some suggested topics include informal outreach (e.g., discussing how informal outreach is going, encouraging members to talk to their friends about safer sex, addressing barriers to informal outreach); check-ins on what’s happening in the community regarding safer sex (e.g., what people are doing, what the community norms are); drug and/or alcohol use and their relationships to safer sex; discussions about HIV testing (where are people getting tested, with what regularity); an update on HIV in the community; and collaborations with other organizations.

Parking lot

While running the meeting, sometimes topics are raised that are not relevant to the immediate task or issue being discussed. The “parking lot” is a list of unfinished issues or ideas raised by the Core Group that weren’t immediately addressed. Sometimes these topics come up when the group doesn’t have time to address them, or they may be related to an...
entirely different discussion, or they just may not fit into the context of the current conversation. For example, suppose the group is discussing an upcoming event, and then someone suggests another event he thinks the Project might be interested in. That proposed event would then be put in a parking lot at the end of the agenda to be discussed in greater detail after everything else on the agenda had been taken care of.

The parking lot is a useful tool that helps manage distractions from the task at hand while ensuring that topics don’t get lost. It is also a good place to put event ideas, workshop suggestions, and other information that gradually become part of an ongoing list of “parking lot items.” The entire parking lot list does not need to be covered at each meeting, and due to time limitations never could be. The Core Group gets to decide what parking lot items they want to tackle at each meeting. The important thing is not to forget about what’s on the list, otherwise it will end up as a “garbage can” instead of a “parking lot!”

Announcements

Many Core Groups take the opportunity at the end of each meeting to make any relevant announcements. These can be announcements about birthdays, holidays, new events or openings around town, fun things to do, where everyone is going to dinner that night, or anything else that doesn’t require much discussion.

It is also helpful to talk about other events of interest in the community. Examples might be an upcoming gay pride festival, a film festival, the opening of a new coffee shop, or volunteer opportunities at local agencies and fundraisers. Encouraging participants to attend other activities can help them feel like they are part of a larger community, and when young men from the Project attend other events, they can also act as its ambassadors.

Formally end each meeting

Formally end each Core Group meeting by thanking everyone for coming and participating in the meeting, and invite them to stick around and socialize. As discussed earlier, the socializing time can provide a nice opportunity for newcomers to meet other guys and to find out more about getting involved in the Project. This informal socializing time can help build community by providing opportunities for the participants to have fun and find support.
Initial Core Group meetings

Once a group of potential Core Group members has been identified, it is helpful to invite them to an informational meeting about the Project. At this meeting the Coordinators introduce themselves, describe their vision for the Project, and present its general framework. The goals of this first meeting are threefold:

- To inform potential Core Group members about the Project
- To inspire them to become involved
- To invite them to join the Core Group

Creating an enjoyable, uplifting, and sociable atmosphere for the meeting is essential. Having music playing in the Project space when men arrive helps create a welcoming and relaxed environment. Providing refreshments (typically a whole meal for the first few meetings) and an opportunity for the men to mingle and socialize also helps to set a pleasant tone for the meeting. *(See Figure 5.1 in the Appendix to this module for copies of agendas used by the Albuquerque Project for the initial four Core Group meetings. See Figure 5.7 in the Appendix to this module for additional sample Core Group agendas.)* Remember that it is most effective to describe the Project as a community-building program that also focuses on HIV prevention. The social aspects of the program should be emphasized at this meeting since many young men are not intrigued about being part of an HIV prevention effort, but do want to be a part of a program that focuses on community-building and includes social activities. Of course HIV prevention, and the fact that HIV is impacting so many young men’s lives, are important topics to address. However, also discuss the broader issues facing young men. At the conclusion of the meeting, the Coordinators should ask the men to let them know if they are interested in being on the Core Group, and set a time for the next meeting.
A useful exercise for one of the first meetings is to brainstorm and discuss the problems and dilemmas that young gay/bisexual men face. Often these issues will include where to meet other young men besides bars, the lack of places to socialize, the lack of community, AIDS/HIV, safer sex, and cattiness among young gay/bisexual men. It is important to give the Core Group members adequate time to share their feelings about these salient issues. This exercise helps motivate the men for the next activity, which is to brainstorm some activities for the Project to sponsor that would address the various problems they identified. Some activities that have been organized include video nights, dance parties, balls, open-houses, barbeques, picnics, J-setting, retreats, vogueing nights, outings, games nights, basketball, football, roller-blading groups, reading groups, volleyball games, group discussions, political actions, and workshops or forums on various issues ranging from boyfriends to how to do drag. Maintaining an optimistic and uplifting tone at these initial meetings will help Core Group members feel inspired to take action. Future meetings can then focus more concretely on issues to address, as well as activities the Project might want to initiate, and how to integrate HIV prevention into all these activities.
Evaluating the Core Group meetings

Meet the day after to debrief about the Core Group meeting. It’s very helpful to set aside some time on the day following each Core Group meeting for the Coordinators to meet with each other, or to meet with the Project Supervisor. This is the time to analyze how the Core Group meeting went, to decide how it could be improved, and to identify all the tasks that need to be accomplished during the upcoming week to make sure every detail is covered. It is always important to review the process that occurred during the Core Group in order to analyze if there was tension or conflict in the group, if good decision-making processes were followed, and if the Coordinators have any concerns about what occurred in the meeting or with each others’ facilitation.

In addition, of course, the Coordinators need to think through the implications of the decisions made and the team reports, and how these further the Project’s goals. The Core Group planning checklist in Figure 5.8 in the Appendix to this module can be used for this purpose. The issues and tasks that arise can then be put into the Coordinators’ behavioral objectives (See Module 4: Coordinators for more information on behavioral objectives).

Points to cover are:

- What tasks must be accomplished, when, and by whom?
- How can volunteers be incorporated into those processes?
- Who will follow up with the volunteers?

Complete required evaluation forms

One tip to successful program evaluation is to complete any required report forms as soon as possible after every activity. Core Group attendance/demographics and topics discussed can be recorded on the Mpowerment Project evaluation forms (see Module 12: Evaluation, Figure 12.6: Core Group Evaluation and Planning Form) or on other forms that the funder requires.

Discuss Core Group meeting with the Project Supervisor

If possible, it is helpful to receive feedback from the Project Supervisor after each Core Group meeting in order to discuss how it went, what was accomplished, and what was planned to address during the meeting. If a supervision meeting doesn’t occur, it may be possible to set up a phone call,
a regular e-mail report, or a voicemail report with the Project Supervisor. Ideally at the same time, the Coordinators also share their behavioral objectives with the Project Supervisor, since these are closely related to what occurs and what decisions are made at the Core Group meeting. Coordinators can also share their behavioral objectives with each other, and this can be a great tool for processing and evaluating the Core Group. The Core Group checklist in Figure 5.8 can be used as a reference tool here as well.

**Monitoring the Core Group**

**Role of Coordinators**

> Although all members of the Core Group—including the Coordinators—have an equal voice in decision-making, at the start of the Project the Coordinators will have the clearest understanding of the Project’s goals, objectives, and methods. Hence, it is important for the Coordinators to provide guidance to the Core Group as they make plans or deliberate about decisions. The Coordinators should pose questions to the Core Group so that they reflect on whether the activities are advancing the larger goals for the Project, namely 1) whether young men are becoming empowered, 2) if a strong and healthy young gay/bisexual men’s community is developing, 3) if word about the Project is spreading throughout the community, and 4) if young men are having conversations about safer sex with their peers? Below are a few examples of specific questions Coordinators can pose to the Core Group to get them to think about the larger goals for the Project.

- If we put on this outreach event, will we effectively reach all the different groups of young gay/bisexual men we’re trying to reach in our community?
- Do we need to have an event that will reach a particular segment of the community that we haven’t yet reached?
- If we choose this name for the Project, will we risk alienating any groups?
- If we have this much disagreement about a decision, perhaps we need to back up and reconsider the source of our differing opinions.
- Will doing this activity help guys to think more deeply about [issue]?
- Are we addressing HIV prevention issues in various ways in this event?
The Coordinator’s role is to help the Core Group keep on track by encouraging members to reflect on their roles and decisions. It is not the role of the Coordinators to tell the group exactly what to do or to point out mistakes, at least not overtly. Using a “reflective” approach is more likely to foster a sense of empowerment and to build strong decision-making skills among Project volunteers as they think through what they are doing and why they are doing it, than is a directive approach.

It’s important for Coordinators to know if things are or are not getting done. The Coordinators need to monitor if Core Group members, subcommittees, and teams are doing their work. When Core Group members volunteer to do something, it’s a good idea for the Coordinators to follow up with them in a timely fashion to check on progress. Sometimes Coordinators and volunteers have different understandings about what everyone agreed to do, and a quick phone call or e-mail can help correct these situations. Additionally, volunteers have a lot going on in their lives and they may need some gentle reminders about getting their work done for the Project. Occasionally a task that a volunteer agreed to do turns out to require more time or is harder to accomplish than was first envisioned. If the Coordinators don’t check in with volunteers about their progress, the delay in getting the task accomplished may not be apparent until it’s too late to redistribute the workload or find another solution.

**Role of Project Supervisor**

The agency Project Supervisor can play a critical advisory role to the Core Group, especially during its first few months. It is highly recommended that Project Supervisors attend all Core Group meetings for the first month, and then every other meeting for an additional two or three months. After this, attendance once every few months usually works well. During the meetings, he or she can model ways of getting the Core Group to reflect and work together cooperatively. The Project Supervisor’s presence also supports the Coordinators, who are usually less experienced at group facilitation. *(See Module 3: Implementing Agency for more information about supervising the Mpowerment Project.)*

Core Group members are likely to be unclear about Project goals and objectives in the beginning, and this lack of clarity will carry over into their decision-making. At a couple of study Project sites, for example, Core Group members initially thought they should conduct outreach on HIV prevention at high schools. Project organizers had to point out the statistics of HIV infection among young gay/bisexual men and explain that the Project was funded specifically to target young adults (18-
29 year olds). After receiving this information, the Core Groups realized their error and refocused outreach planning to target their own age group.

Events that the Core Group sponsors should be those that all members can get behind. The Project Supervisor’s presence at meetings during the first few months of a newly formed Core Group can help ensure that this happens. As a case in point, one Core Group decided it would hold an event called an “anti-Madonna” party even though the idea was offensive to several of the Core Group members. At the meeting, the Project Supervisor reminded members that one of the main objectives of the Mpowerment Project is to build a supportive community. He then asked whether the event they were planning would contribute to this goal if the theme was creating deep divisions within the Core Group. The Project Supervisor’s presence and involvement helped the group reflect on their decision. The Core Group members were then able to see the larger issue, and unanimously decided to change the party’s theme.

### Parameters of Core Group decision-making power

Although the Core Group is invested with considerable decision-making authority, it does operate within certain parameters. For example, since the first Mpowerment Projects were funded through the University of California, which does not allow alcohol at university events, alcohol could not be served at outreach events. Likewise, to avoid problems with funders (and their reputation in the community), sexual activity is not allowed at the outreach performances or at the Project space. It is important to make such parameters known to the Core Group right from the start. Establishing parameters builds trust and understanding between the Core Group, the Coordinators, and the Project Supervisor. If parameters are not set up and clearly stated at the outset, if the Core Group is suddenly told at some later point “you’re not allowed to do that,” it can undermine their belief in their decision-making power. At the same time, it is important at the beginning of a Project not to establish too many rules about what the Core Group can and cannot do.

The Project Supervisor and Coordinators are more knowledgeable about the Project’s budget than is the Core Group, which is why they make most of the budget decisions. However, once the Core Group has gained some knowledge about the Project’s methods and goals and some experience in carrying out
activities, it can be given a budget for specific activities such as an outreach event and allowed to decide how to allocate the resources.

Certain limits also exist in selecting a Project name for each site. Since research has shown that most young gay/bisexual men are not attracted to programs that focus solely on HIV/AIDS, the Mpowerment Project organizers have specified that the following words not be part of the program name: “AIDS,” “HIV,” “education,” or “health.” In addition, in order not to scare off men who are not completely out about their sexuality, the program name should not include the words “gay” or “queer.”

**Common challenges Core Groups face**

Since the Core Group is the decision-making body for the program, it is extremely important that they make the best decisions possible. A number of obstacles to good decision-making can arise.

### Impediments to good decision-making

Making well thought-out decisions sometimes takes a substantial amount of time. It requires carefully weighing the positive and negative aspects of the decision, and often involves soliciting input from others outside of the Core Group. On occasion the Core Group begins to tire of the slow deliberations required to make good decisions. In a desire to get something accomplished in a short time, or because members may become inpatient with always having to weigh decisions, insufficient thought and time may be spent on planning events. This can result in the group producing events that are poorly executed or poorly attended (as, for example if it forgot to include HIV prevention components or neglected to sufficiently publicize the event). Besides being demoralizing for the Core Group and Project volunteers, inadequate planning also creates a negative image of the Project in the young gay/bisexual men’s community.

In addition, some Core Group members may be quite attached to their own opinions, which can result in their not listening fully to other’s opinions or respecting what they have to say. This may result in divisiveness, in which case the decision-making process becomes quite difficult.

### Solutions

The most effective solution to these and other decision-making problems is to put things into perspective by reminding the group of “the big picture.” Help group members determine where the decision fits within the Project’s broader goals of building community and preventing young gay/bisexual men from becoming infected with HIV. Also, remind Core Group members that taking the time together to review and reflect upon their decision-making process—or essentially how they treat one another
during group deliberations—is as important as reaching a good decision, because it also contributes to a stronger sense of community.

Another effective approach is to divide the decision-making process into stages. For example, a number of sites have followed a two-stage process in deciding upon a name for the Mpowerment Project. During an initial brainstorming session, Core Group members jot down a variety of names for the Project and discuss the pros and cons of each. (See Figure 5.5 in the Appendix to this module for skills-building tips on brainstorming.) Then they can select the top 10 ideas and “test market” them with young men in the community to solicit their reactions. At the next Core Group meeting, members can report back to the group on what they found out. By using this information gathering process, the Core Group now has additional input and can base their decision on something more concrete than the Core Group members’ personal opinions. This approach can be used whenever a very important decision is being made (such as selecting a theme for a major event), and it requires only a little more time to make the optimal choice.

In addition, having the group prepare a detailed timeline and task assignments will also reduce the likelihood of producing events that are poorly planned and executed. (See Module 7: Formal Outreach—Social Outreach Events and Outreach Teams.) Occasionally a Core Group member decides that he finds the slow, deliberate process of decision-making to be quite unpleasant. Such an individual might find it preferable to volunteer on a team where he can work on more immediate activities, such as organizing a volleyball tournament or participating with outreach in the bars.

Consensus Versus majority rule

A natural question that arises is whether the Core Group makes decisions through consensus or majority rule. Striving to reach total agreement on every issue is cumbersome and can sometimes result in a decision never being made. When decisions are made by majority rule, however, a decision can be reached that leaves slightly less than half of the group feeling frustrated. It is always preferable to strive for general agreement on a subject. In order for the Project to succeed, it is important for the Core Group to carefully consider all its decisions. All Core Group members should have the opportunity to fully express their thinking on each subject, with all others carefully and respectfully listening to their peers’ thoughts.

Sometimes the Coordinators may suggest that a decision be put off until Core Group members have had a chance to ask their friends for their input on the topic, as in the example described above regarding selecting a name for the Project. At a future meeting, the topic can be discussed again. At such moments it is valuable to remind Core Group members about the importance of respecting a diversity of opinions during the decision-making process. This type of sensitivity helps to develop a supportive community that embraces diversity in all its forms.
It can also be very helpful to remind everyone of the Project’s ground rules, including respecting the diversity of opinions and being respectful of each other. This is especially true when conversations get too “heated” or personal.

**Becoming a clique**

Occasionally the Core Group becomes cliquish. This is understandable since its members meet weekly, discuss issues and carry out activities, and end up spending a considerable amount of time together. However, if the Core Group becomes too cliquish and is not welcoming of newcomers, then this problem needs to be addressed. In such situations, the Core Group may need to be reminded of the community-building goals of the Project and of the need to attract and welcome new participants. Publicizing Project events broadly gives all young men in the community the opportunity to attend, and at the events, let men know that they are welcome to come to the Core Group. It’s important that young gay/bisexual men in the community know that Core Group meetings are open to all, including newcomers. At every Core Group meeting, make sure to greet all newcomers and introduce them to current volunteers as well as other newcomers to the Core Group.

**Core Group Adaptations**

**Restricting Core Group membership**

We have observed some adaptations by community-based organizations to Core Groups that are noteworthy. One adaptation was enacted by Mpowerment Detroit, and involved the creation of a Core Group that members joined by way of an internship process. They called their Core Group the Young Brothers United, or YBU (an acronym that also posed the important question, “Why Be You?”). In order to become a YBU member, guys had to apply and then meet a number of different requirements. The interns had to do a predetermined amount of volunteering and facilitation of groups and events over the course of the year in order to “graduate” to YBU membership. They also had to complete a specified number of hours conducting outreach and training on topics such as effective group facilitation, and effective outreach and event planning. Applications for the YBU were accepted once a year. After the interns had taken on significant responsibility and had proved themselves to be committed to helping their community as well as bettering themselves (for example, completing a GED, enrolling in a local college), they were allowed to become YBU members.

The Project Supervisor of Mpowerment Detroit understood that the added hierarchical structure wasn’t as fluid as in the original design because it limited inclusion in the Core Group—not everyone could join when they wanted. However, the guys themselves pushed for this structure as a way to protect the reputation of the group. The participants felt that the additional requirements would act as a buffer and protect the group from drama. They wanted to weed out guys who said they wanted to join but in reality didn’t want to do the work. For those who remained interested (and there were many), the YBU structure gave them something to work towards and provided them with tangible achievements they could reflect
on with pride. They even instituted an “Executive Core Group” for long standing YBU members in order to build in an additional layer of goal setting structure. Although this may sound very hierarchical, and quite different from the typical Mpowerment Project, eventually joining the Executive Core Group was a goal that young men could achieve if they put in the time and commitment to the Project.

Mpowerment Detroit’s adaptation to the Core Group retains fidelity to the original intervention’s design because:

- it continued the principles of being an empowering experience for young men
- it was run by and for young men themselves
- they continued to seek Core Group members from diverse parts of the community so that diffusion would occur

This adaptation could be challenging for some Mpowerment Projects, however, because it creates additional monitoring and record keeping in order to confirm that the stated requirements are being met. Additionally, this structure is unlikely to work at the start of a Project because prospective Core Group members may not see the benefits of aspiring to be on the Core Group. Indeed, for Mpowerment Detroit, the YBU structure evolved over time. Thus, Projects that choose to design their Core Group in this way should only do so after a program has been in operation for a while.

**Paying Core Group members**

Another adaptation that we have seen in several Mpowerment Projects is to pay Core Group members a small stipend. The rationale behind this practice is that young men from economically disadvantaged backgrounds gain self-esteem by being paid something for their time. Additionally, they are more willing to participate in the Core Group if they are compensated for their time since they desperately need financial help, sometimes simply to cover the costs of transportation to and from the meetings.

Although we recognize these benefits, we also believe that there are downsides to paying Core Group members that should be considered. One issue is the importance of having diverse men join the Core Group. Providing stipends may limit how many men can be part of the group due to budgetary constraints. It could also be problematic to have both paid and unpaid Core Group members, since men who are not paid may not want to participate. This might result in a Core Group that doesn’t change over time, which may limit expansion into diverse social networks.

A second problem that may arise is that Core Group members may feel they only need to work on the Project when they are being paid, when in fact their efforts will be needed for more activities than the Core Group meetings alone. However, there are ways to address this issue. For example, Core Group members could be reimbursed for their transportation expenses at least part of the time, since it is unlikely a Project could afford to pay all transportation costs for everyone in the Project.
An alternative to paying each Core Group member a stipend could be holding a lottery at each meeting. Those in attendance would get to participate in the lottery for a chance at being paid for the following week. Such a system would not discourage new members from joining the Core Group, since they would have as much of a chance of winning as long-time members.

Increasing non-monetary incentives for participating in the Core Group is yet another option, especially those that are likely to increase community-building such as taking active Core Group members out to dinner, on retreats, or on camping trips. Rather than paying Core Group members to attend meetings, Projects might also explore ways to compensate members for specific tasks (e.g., recruiting new men into M-groups, designing a flyer, distributing flyers throughout the community).

Limiting voting rights for new Core Group attendees

Another adaptation we have seen relates to voting by Core Group members. The Core Group, as it was originally designed, allowed anyone to vote when they attended a meeting, even if they hadn’t attended an M-group or Core Group before. Many Projects have found this to be frustrating, because new members were allowed to vote even though they did not necessarily have a full grasp of the Project goals and Core Elements. Sometimes a Core Group had been working on developing an event over several meetings, and a new person would suddenly show up at a meeting and try to change the direction of the planning.

For these reasons, a number of Projects have added the rule that individuals cannot be voting members of the Core Group until they have attended a certain number of meetings (often three are required) and have attended an M-group. As Mpowerment Detroit’s adaptation illustrated, other Projects have felt that one needs to “earn” a place at the table by developing leadership skills and showing the ability to follow through on responsibilities. We think that these adaptations make a lot of sense when they translate into having a more functional Core Group. At the same time, it is always important to keep in mind the Mpowerment Project’s Guiding Principle of the diffusion of HIV prevention messages into diverse segments of the community. Therefore, it is not desirable to create barriers for new men to join the Core Group, since they often represent new social networks. Thus, if a Project decides to add requirements for becoming a voting Core Group member, they should be reasonable.
Volunteerism

Volunteerism is at the very heart of the Mpowerment Project. The Project can only succeed if numerous young men volunteer their time and talents to its day-to-day operations. Not only do volunteers do most of the work that keeps the Project running, but they also become powerful agents of change in their diverse communities. A relatively small staff can accomplish a tremendous amount by effectively mobilizing a large, diverse, and dynamic volunteer base. For example, the Mpowerment Project in Eugene, OR operated with four part-time staff, but they recruited, trained, and supported over 100 young gay/bisexual men who volunteered in the Project, either as Core Group members or guys who helped out for a single event.

It does not matter how much or how little time someone can spare. There is a role for every young gay/bisexual man in the Mpowerment Project. The most important thing is to involve as many men as possible. This is because everyone who volunteers comes into contact with the Project’s norms and philosophy. That philosophy stresses the importance of consistently having safer sex, getting tested regularly for HIV, and being part of a community whose members actively support each other. As such, each young gay/bisexual man who gets involved with the Project becomes a potential “change agent” who then takes this message back to his networks or social circles, thus attracting more people into the Project. The Project calls this phenomenon its “diffusion process,” and this is one of the Mpowerment Project’s Guiding Principles. Although many volunteers never engage in any
type of formal outreach at bars or at community events, this does not affect
the Project’s effectiveness in any way. Anyone who participates is likely to
contribute to the Project’s outreach simply by sharing information about it
with their friends.

Another reason to have as many volunteers as possible is because by
volunteering, the men feel a part of the community that the Project is seeking
to build. This is another Guiding Principle of the Project, building a community
of young gay/bisexual men who support each other in practicing safer sex and
getting tested regularly. Thus, having more volunteers means having a larger
community, and this in itself can attract more men to the Project.

Supporting volunteerism

It is critical that Project Coordinators know the essentials of working
effectively with volunteers. Specifically, it is helpful for the Coordinators
to attend to the following areas on an ongoing basis:

- Encouraging and valuing the contributions of volunteers
- Making certain that volunteers receive careful training and supervison
- Coordinating the effective use of volunteers
- Ensuring that volunteers remain motivated, happy, and productive
- Ensuring that volunteers reflect the diversity of young gay/bisexual men in the community

This section provides some suggestions and insights on ways to facilitate
volunteers’ contributions to the Project, but we also suggest that
Coordinators take full advantage of other resources within their agency or
community of information about successfully working with volunteers. Staff
from elsewhere in the implementing organization or other organizations may
have helpful tips on how to motivate and retain volunteers.
Opportunities for volunteers

There are many opportunities for volunteers in the Mpowerment Project. Not every participant needs to join the Core Group in order to make a valuable contribution to the Project. One of the strengths of the Mpowerment Project is that it offers many ways for young gay/bisexual men to become involved, depending on their interests, talents, and time. Below are numerous examples of volunteer opportunities, grouped by activity areas.

Volunteer opportunities with the Mpowerment Project

Clerical/Administrative

☐ answering the telephone
☐ assisting with mailings/e-mail distributions
☐ making calls (or sending text messages) to schedule and remind M-group participants
☐ maintaining mailing/e-mail list of participants
☐ developing a Project calendar/newsletter/MySpace/Facebook page
☐ assisting with computer issues
☐ developing and maintaining the Project website
☐ developing and maintaining the Project library
☐ decorating/maintaining Project space
☐ fundraising/obtaining in-kind donations
☐ grant writing

Planning/Design

☐ being a member of the Core Group
☐ helping to plan outreach events
☐ designing fliers and publicity materials
☐ designing outreach materials
☐ assembling outreach materials
☐ designing and making costumes for the Outreach Team

Outreach/Contact with Public

☐ participating on the Outreach Team
☐ posting and distributing publicity materials at physical locations as well as online (to physical locations and online social networking sites)
☐ hosting Social Outreach Events
☐ recruiting and scheduling M-group participants
☐ co-facilitating M-groups
☐ hosting drop-in hours at the Project space

It is vital to express appreciation for Project volunteers and to recognize their contributions.
Involving volunteers in the project and empowering them

The Mpowerment Project has a unique philosophy about working with volunteers. Instead of using volunteers to simply get tasks done, it facilitates a process for participants to take on roles of authority, leadership, and responsibility that fosters a sense of ownership of the Project. It is important that the Coordinators do not convey the idea that the staff is “on top” and that the volunteers work for the staff. Coordinators should be able and willing to participate in all of the tasks volunteers are asked to carry out, acting as mentors to volunteers along the way. It is not appropriate for Coordinators to delegate the most boring and dull tasks to volunteers. For the Project to succeed, the young men who participate in it must develop a sense of ownership of the Project and the Project’s goals.

Every task in the Mpowerment Project can become an opportunity to build community among volunteers (one of its Guiding Principles). For example, envelope stuffing and making safer-sex kits are essential tasks that can readily be performed in a social atmosphere. Likewise, the Outreach Team activities can be fun social opportunities as men get together to make costumes, plan their outreach performances, or gather before an outreach activity at a bar or community event. These activities give participants a chance to spend time together, talk, listen, and get to know and appreciate one another. They are also opportunities to support each other in practicing safer sex, and remind each other to provide the same support to friends.
Recruiting volunteers

Every young man who comes to an Mpowerment Project activity should be personally welcomed by a Project member and given an interest sheet to fill out. (See Figure 5.2. in the Appendix to this module for sample volunteer interest sheets.) The interest sheet contains a question on whether the respondent would like to find out more about Mpowerment Project activities, and also whether he would like to volunteer for the Project. Most importantly, the interest sheets are a way to gather the name and contact information (address, phone, e-mail) of every person who attends a Project activity. Some Projects have found that asking for too much information on the interest sheet deters some men from filling it out, so it’s probably best to keep it simple. The sheet also contains a list of volunteer opportunities so the respondent can check those that interest him.

From the interest sheets it is then possible to compile a Project mailing list, e-mail distribution list, and volunteer database. The Coordinators should review the volunteer list regularly, call men who have indicated an interest in volunteering, and match them with an initial task. Never forget to contact every single person who completes an interest sheet—and as soon as possible after they sign up, since that is when they have expressed interest (as opposed to waiting a while, when they may no longer be interested or available). Not following up on interest sheets has the same effect as telling someone that you don’t really want him involved in the Project. Interest sheets are an invaluable resource for the Project. Treat them like gold!

Since the Project center serves as a drop-in space for many young gay/bisexual men, there are usually a number of men just hanging out at the center. These men can be invited to help with whatever tasks are needed at the time, such as stuffing envelopes, putting together outreach packets, tidying up the center, and so forth. Working on simple tasks together is often an easy way for the participants to get to know each other and the Coordinators. Usually men appreciate being asked to help, and the experience of working on a small task can inspire them to volunteer for future, larger tasks.

Tips for involving volunteers

**Start small**  
Match volunteers with a small task for their first project. If participants begin with an overly ambitious project and fail at it, they will feel less empowered than if they start with a smaller endeavor and succeed. For instance, ask a new volunteer to design an event invitation instead of coordinating the entire event. Then for their next project, give them something a bit more challenging. Start small, but don’t underestimate what volunteers are willing or capable of contributing. At the same time, it is also important to ask for what you need, especially from volunteers who have already demonstrated their capabilities.
Respect their time

Many volunteers have busy social, school, or professional lives. Although some may not be able to volunteer much time to the Project, their contributions—however limited—can prove extremely valuable. It is important to avoid making too many demands on volunteers that may unintentionally create barriers to attracting the most gregarious, socially active men into the Project.

Stress the benefits

There are many benefits to volunteering for the Mpowerment Project. Through volunteering, young men can make new friends, meet potential partners, learn more about HIV issues, participate in outreach events, learn new skills, and feel good about themselves by knowing they are making a contribution to their community. Always point out these benefits when talking to potential volunteers.

Extend a personal invitation

Most young gay/bisexual men decide to volunteer when someone from the Project personally invites them to help out with a task. Try to identify what the potential volunteer might be good at when matching him to a task. Ask him what his talents are. Look at what volunteer opportunities he checked on his interest sheet. Then let the volunteer choose the task that sounds most appealing to him. Remember, volunteers report that they are more willing to participate in areas which seem more relevant to their daily lives and in which they have greater expertise.

Encourage M-group attendance

As discussed previously, encouraging every volunteer to attend an M-group is a very important and useful training and orientation strategy. Through the group, volunteers gain a shared experience of the Project philosophy and activities, and they also learn more about their role to build a supportive, health-promoting community. This will help them to be more effective when they interact with Project participants while performing their volunteer tasks. For example, they will know more about the Project’s approach to safer sex (that it is not only a condom promotion project), which is important if they become involved in developing safer sex materials. The M-groups also teach volunteers how to conduct informal outreach with their friends and with each other.

The Mpowerment Project does not require extensive volunteer training, since doing so might deter many young men from participating and reduce the diversity of volunteers. In fact, this is one way that the Mpowerment Project’s approach to volunteers is quite different from that of many other HIV prevention programs. Many require that potential volunteers attend a long and involved training (sometimes spread over several weekends). In contrast, the Mpowerment Project emphasizes the importance of making it easy for young men to volunteer their time and effort, since it recognizes the many benefits that occur from volunteering.
However, specific on-the-job training is essential, as is more intensive training for certain roles, such as facilitating M-groups. For example, volunteers who help design outreach materials will need on-the-job training in using certain software packages and in avoiding the use of “fear approaches” in materials. An additional benefit in becoming a volunteer may be the acquisition of new skills and experiences. For some young men, this may be an added incentive to becoming involved in the Project.

The Mpowerment Project’s approach to volunteers does not require them to undergo extensive training, but they should be strongly encouraged to participate in an M-group.

**Supervising volunteers**

All staff members should understand that empowering volunteers and maintaining the volunteers’ morale is a critical part of their job. It is important to check in frequently with volunteers to make certain they don’t feel overwhelmed with whatever they are doing. During the day-to-day operation of the Project center, outreach events, and M-groups, it is a good idea to communicate with participants to make sure they are having a positive experience and that they feel their input is heard and appreciated. It is also important that volunteers are assisted to critically analyze and reflect upon their work and upon the role the Project has in the young gay/bisexual men’s community. This kind of reflection and analysis is important in all parts of the Project. We recommend that Coordinators meet periodically with individual volunteers to discuss how their experience is going and whether they would like to continue or change their current activities.

**Support for safer sex**

There is a common misconception that people who volunteer with HIV-prevention programs do not need additional information or support to continue practicing safer sex. Frequently they need just as much support as anyone else. The Project encourages using interactions with volunteers as opportunities to share feelings about safer sex. Activities that involve repetitive tasks like envelope stuffing, collaborative design such as producing a publicity flier, or physical work like cleaning the Project space, often allow volunteers to hold conversations with one another while working. These are appropriate times to provide encouragement and support for struggles the volunteers may have maintaining safer sex in their own lives, and in encouraging their friends to have safer sex. A part of the experience volunteering with the Mpowerment Project includes supporting each other as young gay/bisexual men who are part of a community where safer sex is the norm.

**Support to avoid burnout**

Burnout occurs when volunteers feel overwhelmed, stressed, bored, or frustrated over a period of time and see no reason to believe their situation will change in the foreseeable future. Often burnout among volunteers is a sign of poor management, including lack of support, neglect, or overwork. Within the Mpowerment Project, two areas that volunteers often find demanding and stressful are outreach and group facilitation. All organizations that use volunteers have to deal with
the problem of burnout. The solution is to prevent it by putting into place measures that address volunteer needs. Below are strategies that Project sites have found most successful in preventing volunteer burnout.

- Whenever possible, structure the volunteer work so it can be done in a social and fun way. Outreach activities are what draw many young men to the Project, and meeting social needs is one of the Project’s Guiding Principles. Furthermore, when the work environment is enjoyable and involves multiple volunteers, this makes it easier for the volunteers to make new friends, which in turn helps to create community.

- Solicit ideas from volunteers on ways to support their participation, and implement those that can easily be put into place. You could do this by asking, “What would make you feel appreciated for your efforts?”

- Provide debriefing time after outreach events.

- Use pairs or teams of outreach volunteers, rather than having volunteers work alone.

- Hold monthly support meetings for volunteers, and create a relaxing and fun social environment for them.

- Offer volunteers a variety of tasks so they don’t feel that they have to do the same activities all the time.

- Remember that it is preferable for paid staff to do the “grunt work” rather than having volunteers always doing the boring work and paid staff doing the most creative and fun tasks.

- Give away movie passes and/or gift certificates. These can sometimes be obtained at a reduced cost or free-of-charge from local businesses.

- Share whatever positive feedback you receive about the Project with the volunteers.
Core Group Sample Agendas

Sample 1  First Core Group Agenda

Welcome and Introductions
(Can use an “Icebreaker” exercise)

Local Issues and Needs
(Brainstorming and discussion by group, write up topics on flip chart.)

Vision of Young Gay/Bisexual Men’s Community and How to Meet Needs
(Brainstorming and discussion by group, write up responses on flip chart.)

Brief Presentation on New Project
(Be careful to describe it as a community-building Project, within which HIV prevention is addressed—building a supportive community that survives the AIDS epidemic.)

Ideal Image of Project
(Discussion by group, write up responses on flip chart.)

Do Men want to Join Core Group?

Announcements and Next Meeting

Sample 2  Core Group Agenda

Welcome, Introductions, and Overview of Project
(Can use “ice-breaker” exercises.)

Tour of Space and Discussion of Furniture Needs

Name of the Project
(Begin thinking about what to name the Project that will help to convey desired image, remembering guidelines: no AIDS/HIV, education, workshop in name, etc.; write up ideas on flip chart; begin market testing names with friends.)

First Events
(Brainstorm and discussion about what events to hold)

Community Advisory Board
(Description of its function, purpose, ideas of who to have on it)

Next Meetings, Events

Download this form as a Word document at www.mpowerment.org/downloads/figure5-1.doc
Sample 3  Core Group Agenda

Welcome, Introductions, and Overview of Project
(Can use “ice-breaker” exercises.)

Present Agenda for Approval
(Hereafter, always present agenda for approval.)

Ground Rules
(Discussion of group rules; hereafter, they are mentioned at each meeting, although Core Group members should feel free to paraphrase them in their own jargon, to make them culturally relevant.)

Events Discussion
(Continue discussion about what events to hold, new ideas, market testing results.)

Discussion of Name for Project
(Discuss outcome of market testing potential names with friends.)

Core Group Activities
(Begin to make decisions about first events including large outreach event as well as smaller, recurring events.)

Next Meetings

Sample 4  Core Group Agenda

Welcome, Introductions, and Overview of Project
(Can use “ice-breaker” exercises; after the membership of the Core Group stabilizes, you can dispense with overview of Project each time; instead, discuss Project with new Core Group members as they show up for the meeting.)

Present Agenda for Approval

Review Ground rules

Final Selection of the Name of the Project
(Often this takes more than 3 meetings to arrive at good decision.)

Logo Design Contest
(Make an announcement about it, when decisions will be made, who to tell about it.)

Decide First Large Event
(Begin discussing steps that need to be taken, including theme of event, possible dates to do it, ways to build in HIV prevention, when/where/how to do publicity locations, etc.)

Smaller Events/Ongoing Events
Sample Volunteer Interest Sheets

**AMP Interest Form**

- Name: 
- Date of Birth: 
- Age: 
- Address: 
- City: 
- Zip: 
- Phone: 
- Email: 
- Do we need to be discreet? Yes / No
- How did you hear about AMP?

**AMP Interest Sheet**

Please check those areas of AMP that interest you:

- Outreach/Safer Sex Promotion
- Marketing/Publicity
- Designing Materials/Web
- Small Event Planning
- Large Event Planning
- Public Forum Planning
- Administrative
- AMP House Maintenance
- Sign up for UnPlugged Session

Other ideas for involvement, talents you’d like to share or ideas for new projects you’d like to suggest? Please use the back to explain...

**AMP**

Austin Men’s Project

**AMP Interest Sheet**

Please check those areas of AMP that interest you:

- Outreach/Safer Sex Promotion
- Marketing/Publicity
- Designing Materials/Web
- Small Event Planning
- Large Event Planning
- Public Forum Planning
- Administrative
- AMP House Maintenance
- Sign up for UnPlugged Session

Other ideas for involvement, talents you’d like to share or ideas for new projects you’d like to suggest? Please use the back to explain...
Many Mpowerment Projects find it fun and useful to start off their Core Group meeting with an introduction of each participant and a short, engaging icebreaker game. This helps men, especially new men, feel more comfortable talking during the group and also gets the creative juices flowing for the discussions to follow. Here are a few icebreakers that have been used in previous Core Group meetings.

Please feel free to contact us with additional suggestions, and we will add them to the website.

**Penny for your thoughts?**
- **NEEDED:** one penny for each participant
- **DIRECTIONS:** Have each participant take one penny. Have each participant tell a story about something significant about the year on his penny. It is helpful to have pennies minted after most participants were born!

**Take and talk!**
- **NEEDED:** A roll of toilet paper, or enough small objects in a bowl for each participant to take several of, such as straws, pennies, small rocks, wrapped candies, condoms, etc.
- **DIRECTIONS:** Have each participant take from one to ten sheets of toilet paper off the roll, or one to ten objects out of the bowl. When all of the participants have taken at least one piece of toilet paper or one object, tell them that they now get to tell the group as many things about themselves as pieces of toilet paper or objects they took.

**“Question of the week”**
Brainstorm a list of questions. Ask a new question each week. One good resource is The Book of Questions (by Gregory Stock), but it is also fine to make up new questions.

**Examples of questions:**
- Who is your childhood hero and why?
- What book (or person, event, etc.) influenced you the most and how?
- What do you do to get ready every day and why?
- What annoys you the most and how do you deal with it?
- What is your fantasy vacation?
- What is the best meal you cook for yourself?
- What is your family heritage or ethnicity?
- What was the first time you felt different?
- What is your coming out story?
- Etc. etc., … the possibilities are endless!

Note that the questions aren’t answerable with one-word responses. Use them to generate discussion in the group!

**Crossing the stream**
- **NEEDED:** 4-5 “islands”—that is, irregularly cut out pieces of paper, masking tape, and 2 handkerchiefs (one for a blindfold, one to tie someone’s hands together)
- **DIRECTIONS:** Everyone is on the same team. The group has to get from one side of the room to the other “across the stream.” They have to cross by walking together across the “islands.” Once the first participant starts walking across, the person behind him has to follow and keep their foot on the island the first person has his foot on at the same time. So if the first
participant starts with, for example, his left foot on the first island, and then takes a step and puts his right foot on the second island, then the second participant has to put their foot on the first island before the first participant steps with that foot to the third island, and so on.

- If anyone takes a step without having two feet on the island, then that island gets taken away!
- To make it more difficult, one person can be blindfolded, one person can have his hands tied together, one person cannot be spoken to, and one person cannot speak! Participants have to communicate with them in a different way.

Show and Tell

- DIRECTIONS: Ask participants to tell a story about something they have on them...an object from their pocket like a keychain, or lucky charm, their watch or jewelry, even their clothes.

Odds and Ends

- NEEDED: A bowl or box with enough objects in it for each participant to take one. The assortment of objects should be varied and random: a slinky, a condom, small toys (like cars, action figures, dolls), a dildo, an old cellphone, wristwatch, a rock, a wooden block, a picture frame, a lollipop, koosh ball, odd pen, etc. Just lots of small, odd things with no real connection to each other are good to use.
- DIRECTIONS: Have the participants blindly select an object. After everyone has their object, have them make up and tell a short story about it.
- As a variation, the story can go around the room...the first person starts the story about the slinky, and then the next person works the condom into the story, and then the next person works the toy into the story, etc.
- If you have a lot of participants, make sure the story flows briskly. You don’t want this to get out of hand and turn into an epic!

Tell us a secret!

- DIRECTIONS: Have each participant tell the group something about themselves that no one in the group knows.

Play favorites

- Ask participants to answer the question: “Who (or what) is your favorite ____________, and why?”
- SUGGESTIONS COULD BE THEIR FAVORITE: Childhood food, music star, movie, book, play, poem, cartoon, comic book hero, gay icon, city, place, person, politician, sports star, magazine, piece of clothing, season, possession, memory, etc. The possibilities are endless here!

Personality tests

- NEEDED: Get a copy of the personality test from a magazine like Vogue, Cosmo, Teen People, Miss, or something similar. Photocopy enough for each participant to have their own copy.
- DIRECTIONS: Fill out the personality test as per the magazine instructions. Have each participant read his results. As a variation, they can exchange them with someone else to read, or put them in a pile and randomly draw them and read them for each other.
Two-pair share

**DIRECTIONS:** Split the participants into pairs. The Coordinator should join a pair. If there is an uneven number, the Coordinator can make up part of the pair. Have each person talk about themselves to the other participant. Guide the nature of the conversation…invite the participants to ask each other “get to know you” type questions. After 2-3 minutes, switch, so the other person now talks about himself. After 2-3 minutes more, invite the participants back into the group. Have the partners introduce each other to the group and tell about the most interesting things they learned about the other person.

Animal sounds

**NEEDED:** Slips of paper with the names of a variety of animals with distinctive sounds. The number of animals you use will depend on the number of participants you have. Animals can include ducks, dogs, cats, frogs, horses, sheep, or snakes.

**DIRECTIONS:** Have the participants take a slip of paper randomly. After everyone has an animal, tell them to make that animal sound. Then tell all the animals to group together in separate parts of the room. One variation could be that one animal can’t make noise and so has to find his group by just listening to the others.

Birthday game

**The goal of this one is to have everyone line up (or form a circle around the room) from the earliest birthday in the year (i.e., Jan. 1) to the latest (i.e., Dec. 31). The trick is that no one can speak during this exercise. Group members have to find creative, non-verbal ways to communicate their birthdays to each other, and then organize themselves without talking!**

A warm wind blows

**NEEDED:** Enough space and chairs for everyone to be in a big circle facing out (X’s can be taped on the floor, or bits of paper…enough for everyone to stand on – facing out – minus one).

Everyone sits down in a chair (or takes a space) except one person who volunteers to start the icebreaker…perhaps the Coordinator?

The first person makes a statement that starts with “A warm wind blows for everyone…” and then makes a statement that might apply to all, several, or even just a few people in the room.

- “A warm wind blows for everyone…who is wearing jeans!”
- “A warm wind blows for everyone…who has blue eyes!”
- “A warm wind blows for everyone…who loves Beyonce!”
- Etc.

Everyone who fits that description has to get up and run around and find a different seat, or space – but not the one next to the spot they are currently in!

The exercise continues for a set amount of time…10-15 minutes is usually sufficient to get peoples’ blood pumping!
Facilitation Skills

This section contains some helpful tips about facilitating Core Group meetings, although it is not meant to be a comprehensive guide to facilitation skills. We strongly recommend that you seek out facilitation skills trainings in your area or look up some of the many good resources out there in your library, bookstore, or online.

The facilitator for Core Group meetings is not expected to be “the expert,” nor “the lecturer.” Instead, a facilitator helps participants to interact with each other, gain new information, think more deeply about issues, and build upon their experiences. The facilitator guides a process that will help participants to reach their stated goals and objectives within the time allotted. The facilitator’s key role is to help the group experience, learn, and analyze issues together. The facilitator is also a member of the Core Group as well as a Coordinator, and it is tricky to keep these roles clear. The Coordinators are encouraged to provide input as Core Group members—but one of them also facilitate the process that occurs during the Core Group meeting. Sometimes a facilitator could be a Core Group member who is not one of the Coordinators. When that occurs, it should be a person who has attended many Core Group meetings and is adept at facilitation skills (as shown in his co-leading some team meetings, such as the Outreach Team).

An effective Core Group facilitator:

- Keeps the Core Group focused on task and process
- Remains as neutral as possible
- Is a guide that helps the group to plan and accomplish its goals
- Listens more than talks
- Encourages everyone to participate, while remembering that individuals participate in different ways.
- Protects members of the group from attack by others
- Is gender and culturally sensitive
- Energizes a group when it seems to be lagging or group members are indicating boredom, or slows it down when it seems that hasty decisions are being made
- Occasionally recaps what has happened in the meeting, and when needed, reminds the group of pertinent discussions or actions from previous meetings.
- Is alert to signs of confusion (puzzled or frustrated looks, people asking neighbors questions, resistance, etc.).
Doesn’t do the group’s work. Learning is more effective and lasting if the individuals and small groups discover solutions on their own (learning by doing). Frequently ask members if they have questions or wish to offer additional input.

When asking a question of the group, allow group members time to think before answering. Slowly count to 10. This may seem like a long time and silence may feel uncomfortable, but allowing participants time to think is essential for producing thoughtful answers.

The facilitator should not feel that he must be an expert. He may need to remind the group (and himself) that he is a facilitator, not a person who knows everything about any topic that comes up. Ask other participants for their ideas on a question. The facilitator doesn’t need to answer everything.

Is flexible. Changing something midstream doesn’t necessarily mean that planning was done poorly, but rather that the Coordinators are listening, watching, and adjusting the agenda to fit the situation.

A few other general facilitation skills are also important to follow. First, make sure that one person or a few people are not dominating the discussions. One way to handle this is to elicit responses from quieter group members by asking, “Are there any comments from people who haven’t yet said anything on this topic?” Second, ask people to raise their hands if they want to say something. If there are many people wanting to speak, the facilitator should identify who will speak first, second, and third. Often this calms people down as they realize that they will get a turn to talk. Third, remind men not to speak when someone else is speaking so that everyone’s ideas can be heard. And fourth, remind people to limit their side conversations since these are distracting and disrespectful of whoever is speaking.
Brainstorming

The Brainstorming process helps a group generate many ideas in a short period of time. It is an excellent way to come up with many creative solutions to a problem, and to come up with new ideas for events, activities, and/or outreach themes. Some ideas may be radical, others more conservative, others seemingly impossible to implement at first glance. The ideas can be as broad and odd as you like. Brainstorming can be done at any point along the planning process. You can brainstorm all parts of an event or just an activity at an event.

Brainstorming instructions can be as simple as asking the group, “What are your ideas for our next event?” and then writing down every response (no matter how silly an idea seems). Brainstorming works best when everyone is free to be as creative as possible. As such, it’s best to tell the group not to evaluate, praise, or criticize any idea until the idea-generating phase is over. Ideas can be evaluated once the brainstorming session has ended. This freedom will allow people to be as creative as they can, without worrying what someone else will say about their suggestion.

The important point about brainstorming is that there should be no pressure to be “brilliant.” Simply open your mind to whatever pops into it. Think of it as a kind of free association. When I say “event,” what pops into your mind? Much of what you will come up with will not appear to be immediately useful, but that’s okay. Some offhand suggestions will spark a brilliant thought in someone else. The evaluation and selection process will come later, and even the ideas not selected at this time can be saved for future planning exercises or outreach theme ideas.

During brainstorming sessions don’t allow any criticism of ideas. Remind Core Group members that this is the time to explore possibilities and even to push limits. Judgments and analysis at this stage may stunt idea generation.

Here are some tips on how to run a group brainstorming session:

- Define the event or outreach theme you want to plan, and lay out the criteria to be met (e.g., event promotion, M-groups recruitment and safer sex promotion at the event, food, entertainment, etc.).

- Keep the session focused on the event or outreach theme.

- Ensure that no one criticizes or evaluates ideas during the session. Criticism introduces an element of risk for group members when putting forward an idea. This may stifle creativity and cripple the free running nature of a good brainstorming session.

- Encourage an enthusiastic, uncritical attitude among members of the group. Try to get everyone to contribute and develop ideas, including the quietest members of the group.
Have fun brainstorming! Encourage group members to come up with as many ideas as possible, from solidly practical ones to wildly impractical ones. Welcome creativity.

Encourage people to develop other people’s ideas, or to use other ideas to create new ones.

Appoint one person—usually a Coordinator—to jot down ideas that come out of the session. A good way of doing this is to use a flip chart. This can be studied and evaluated after the session.

Listing

This is a brainstorming technique many people find useful. It means doing just what its name suggests—listing possible events, workshops, or outreach themes and then creating sub-lists of other ideas that relate to the original ideas. A list could consist of the main theme of a large event, and then sub-lists would be activities you could conduct at the event that tie in with the theme. Additional sub-lists might be particular phrases or terminology associated with that theme, or aspects of the theme that can be tied into safer sex promotion or community-building.

Remember, hopefully your Core Group members come from diverse segments of the community. They are likely to bring a range of experience to the brainstorming session, which will end up making it more creative. Reminding the group of that, and showing your own enthusiasm and support during the process will build the confidence of participants and increase the success of the session.

Once a list of ideas is developed, you can then begin the selection process. Work with the group to decide what event would be the most appealing, the most interactive, the most fun! Once you have narrowed down the field to 3 or 4 suggestions, you can then decide which one you want to do.

One decision-making process that has met with considerable success and is also fun is to give each Core Group member three votes. You can place little dots or price tag stickers next to the “finalist” ideas, or simply use a show of hands. You can put all three dots next to a single event if you really want that event, or you can split up your votes across two or three event choices. If you have a close tie, then perhaps you can take the two ideas out to the community for additional input. Have the Core Group talk about it with friends to get suggestions of what would be fun and successful. Then together make a final decision at the next Core Group meeting.
Conflict Management

**Nine Core Group Conflict Management Tips**

Conflict among Core Group members is inevitable. In fact, conflict can be helpful when it challenges Core Group to explore new ideas, increases curiosity about differences, and stretches the group’s problem solving and outreach events planning efforts. However, managing conflict within a team made up of different individuals and cultural groups can be challenging due to the differences in values, assumptions, and communication styles. Team building techniques that help members understand the nature of this conflict and constructive methods for resolving it will help them work out disagreements on their own. The following are some guidelines to keep in mind when developing the Core Group and managing conflict. Again, we suggest that you also seek out local courses or seminars on conflict resolution.

1. Create a Core Group environment that encourages members to be open to sharing information about themselves and increases their willingness to hear and accept feedback from others on their ideas and input.

2. Facilitate the Core Group’s understanding that conflict is a result of differences in needs, objectives, and values. Indicate that these differences enhance and enrich the Core Group because despite differences, there can be commonality.

3. Indicate that the group can work to understand differences in a respectful manner while attempting to recognize common ground.

4. Core Group members may differ in how they express disagreement, and those differences may be based on culture or individual experience. These differences can be sources of mutual misunderstanding and can block teamwork. It may be necessary to explore these differences in order to work through issues, collaborate, and compromise.

5. Do not intervene too quickly when conflict occurs between two or more Core Group members. Allow them an opportunity to work it out among themselves first. However, observe how they individually handle the conflict so you can offer constructive feedback so that some resolution is achieved.

6. Intervene to work out the solution if the conflict escalates. Perhaps you can suggest a private conversation to resolve the issue, or an agreement to disagree while the Core Group can work out a new plan.

7. If absolutely necessary, use a third party to mediate. The impartial mediator focuses on helping each Core Group member understand the problem, the different points of view among them, identifies barriers, and then identifies what needs to happen to come to a solution. Make sure at least the Coordinators or two Core Group members have received training to competently mediate disputes.

8. Sometimes individual team members do not have the level of commitment to the team or the level of personal growth needed to work through conflict within a team setting. A Coordinator may need to consider working with individuals separate from the group meetings in order to satisfy their needs and to work on the task at hand. It may also be that the person may work better on a different team, or on individualized tasks.

9. At staff meetings or Project Supervisor meetings, review conflict resolution skills periodically in order to build on the knowledge base.

Here are two websites that offer helpful publications on conflict resolution and management, as well as other team and facilitation materials:

http://www.mediate.org/about-us/resources/books/

http://www.communityatwork.com/
CORE GROUP AGENDA

Date ________________________________

Welcome

Ground Rules

Introduction / Icebreaker

1. Last Event or activity: Discuss success or challenges, who was reached, and lessons learned.
2. Next Event: Brainstorm ideas, start planning. Don’t forget about how to incorporate safer sex messages into the event!
3. Outreach: Ideas, suggestions, and status of outreach; safer sex promotion in community venues; promotion of Social Outreach events and safer sex promotion at Social Outreach events (it’s very important to include a safer sex message into the Social Outreach event); outreach themes, costumes and materials.
4. Publicity: What is being done, what works, what could improve?
5. Informal Outreach: Are we talking to our friends about safer sex and building a strong community?
6. M-groups: What is attendance like? Who do we need to recruit? How?
7. Community Issues: What is going on with young gay/bisexual men? Are we addressing their needs? Are we leaving anyone out?
8. Calendar: Upcoming events, ideas, and community information.
9. Parking lot issues
10. Announcements

Thank you! – And good night!
You can use this simple checklist to cover all your bases when running Core Group meetings!

**Prepare for Core Group!**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Completed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agenda set and written out on flip chart paper or whiteboard</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Space clean and ready for Core Group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condom bowls filled</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music on</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snacks out</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome guys to Core Group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call meeting to order</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ground rules</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introductions &amp; icebreaker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate the Core Group meeting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End meeting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social time after meeting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyze Core Group with fellow Coordinators or Project Supervisor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fill out needed record forms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss Core Group with Project Supervisor and Coordinators</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Check in with Core Group volunteers after the meeting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Download this form as a Word document at [www.mpowerment.org/downloads/figure5-8.doc](http://www.mpowerment.org/downloads/figure5-8.doc)