How to plan and organise an Action – Guidelines

An Action Project is normally not very large or complicated, but still requires planning and organising. Working on cooperative projects is a core activity within Life-Link and the organisation determines the quality of the outcome.

To help you achieving that, we have worked out step-wise Guidelines, with phases in a certain order on how to manage a project to perform an Action. You don´t have to follow the advice in detail, but you will be helped to achieve a good quality result if you take advice from phases in the order they are listed.

Project phases

Phase 1 – How to take an initiative

Phase 2 – Selection of project

Phase 3 – Definition of desired results

Phase 4 – Planning of activities

Phase 5 – Implementation

Phase 6 – Follow Up

Phase 1 - How to take an initiative and discuss ideas

Life-Link wants to work for a future where all people can live safely without fear of war, a polluted environment, discrimination, etc. We all can do something in our own school/community in order to bring about a better world. How to start?

1) Find a teacher and schoolmates to form a Life-Link Action Team to attend environmental or any other concern of yours.
2) Call a first meeting with your Life-Link Action Team and agree on an initial basic organization.
3) Appoint a "Project Coordinator", who is responsible for calling Project Meetings and coordinating discussions. It may be a teacher, but preferably a suitable student.
4) Appoint a "Project Secretary", who is responsible for documentation of meetings discussions and decisions. Make notes accessible for the Action Team Members and others concerned.

Call a kick-off meeting with your Life-Link Action Team and ask yourself:

- "What sort of needs and problems we see in our school or in our community, within the Life-Link objectives and that we want to do something about?"
- Consult the Life-Link Homepage (http://lifelinkschools.org/) under the headings: "Care for Yourself, Care for Others and Care for Nature" to find lists of suggested care actions.

A very efficient way of doing is to give the team members time to think and ask them to write down their ideas on paper slips, one idea per slip. A practical way of doing this is to use Post-It-slips with glue ("Yellow slip method"), which can be put directly on the wall. This takes place in silence, which gives a much more efficient process. After an appropriate time, ask everybody to read out their ideas from the paper slips. They will then be put on the wall. The items can then be organised in clusters simply by moving them together on the wall. Some of them may have to do with the environment, others with human rights, other with social problems.

In most cases, teams will have more ideas than you could handle and you will need to apply priorities. In most cases, you need to narrow the ideas down to only one per Action Team. Some teams may prefer to discuss this together and come to a common agreement. Otherwise the Team members could be asked to individually rate the ideas in figures on a scale and then count. Judge from the criteria what do you think is most important and what can you handle practically. Be sure to document the results and issue to the Action Team. It helps all members to keep track where they are in the project.

Phase 2 – Selection of project

The aim of this phase is to select what project we are going to execute. First, the Team should generate as many suggested projects as possible. The Action Team holds brainstorming sessions to list ways how things could be done. Again, use the silent "Yellow slip" method, described in "Step 1" under the leadership of a "Process leader". Put the slips on the wall, form clusters and narrow down the alternatives. Make it possible for everyone to contribute.

As a result of this stage, a decision is being taken as to what kind of project the Action Team will select. Are we going to hold a campaign, organise visits to people, perform a piece of drama, etc.

The result of the decision making will be written down and may be reported to the School Management and other parties we want to involve.

Phase 3 – Definition of desired results

Defining the end results enables the Action Team to think in terms of what sort of activities have to be carried out. In formulating the results of the project, try to be as specific as possible and preferably measurable. It will be facilitate at the end of the project to see what result you have achieved. Do not make targets too tough in order to prevent frustration and allow for margins. Document the desired results and inform all concerned.

Examples of targets could be:

- We want 25% of the school population to take part in the actions during our campaign day.
- We want to meet 50 people during visits to homes for the elderly.

Phase 4 – Planning of activities

Planning of project steps

Think through what activities are required to reach your results and in what order the activities should be performed. Two important principles of project management are instrumental in the planning stages:

1) List the steps in the project in the order they should be taken.

If you don´t do this, you might find that you did not begin at the right point, or that you come to disagree on the order of steps to be taken once you are underway etc. Decide what steps can be taken in parallel and those who cannot. Try to follow a logical order and work from broad to fine

2) Setting time limits

Setting time limits from the very beginning offers a guarantee that the project will be finished when spirits are still high. If there is a desire for continuation, it is much better to design a new project with revised goals, a fresh approach, etc.

Project activities mostly take more time than you anticipate! Build in time margins to prevent delays within the project plan and disappointments that can take down enthusiasm and over time threaten the entire project.

Organisation

A clear organisation of the project is a prerequisite to get good results. Assuming that we have a “Project Coordinator” and one “Project Secretary” already, decides who else is involved in the project and in what capacity. List your complete Action Team and specify what tasks and roles they will fulfil.

Documentation helps to share the information. With a good overview of the functions and roles of those involved in the project everyone knows better her/his place in the whole. Also document the results of your planning in terms of the logical order of steps and how you will manage the control. Send a copy of your document to all concerned.

Money

Some projects that Life-Link schools take on will create some costs. It may be only a small amount of money but it is recommended that the Life-Link Action Team makes up a budget beforehand. Beginning with a rough estimate of the costs and as more information becomes available, go more into detail. This can be shared with the schools secretariat and a budget request can be made.

Phase 5 – Implementation

The practical way of managing the Action Project and combine that with internal information in the Action Group is to hold regular Project meetings. There, each of the project team members report on their sub project, the achievements and status compared to the agreed plan. Begin with frequent meetings, maybe weekly, and make them less frequent as the project proceeds. “Too many” meetings is better than too few.

Often you will find that some sub projects have been delayed or that the planned result has not been achieved. Here it is up to the involved teacher or the appointed “Project Coordinator” to support and facilitate the work for the Team members. This can be of utmost importance through “tough” periods within the project.

Information to others than the Project Team who will be involved in the planned activity is extremely important. If, for example the Action Team wants to perform a campaign day involving all or part of the school, it is important to send the proper information to each person and keep an eye on the response.

Implementation of the project will be finished when it can be shown that all the required results have been reached within the scheduled time limits.

Phase 6 – Follow up

This step consists of two basic elements. First, the project is evaluated, where the Team tries to answer questions such as:

- What did we do really well and what can be improved in the future?
- What did we learn from the project?
- How was cooperation among the members of the Action Team?
- How was the relation with the School Management?

The second element is looking into the possibilities of follow up. Now that the project has been finished what can be done in order to consolidate the results?

- The outcomes of the project will have become normal procedures of the school.
- A follow up project will start in order to consolidate results or achieve certain desired improvements as a result of the evaluation.
- The project was a one off activity, there is no follow up or consolidation.

The results of the evaluation and decisions regarding follow up are written down on paper and reported to the school authorities. If desired they are published in the school bulletin.

And don´t forget to send a short report to the Life-Link International Office through the homepage: http://lifelinkschools.org/