

National Purpose, Local Action

Organizational Effectiveness of Sierra Club Groups and Chapters

REPORT DIGEST

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I arise in the morning. . .
. . . torn between a desire to improve (or save) the world
. . . and a desire to enjoy (or savor) the world.
It makes it hard to plan the day.

E. B. White
U.S. author and humorist
(1899 – 1985)

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NPLA REPORT DIGEST

THE NPLA PROJECT

1. Introduction

We decided to undertake the National Purpose, Local Action project in recognition of the fact that accomplishment of the national purposes of the Sierra Club had to become grounded in effective local action. The environmental movement was – and is – at a crossroads. Most national environmental organizations lack an effective local activist base. And most local activist groups lack effective national strategy. Almost uniquely, however, the Sierra Club is composed not only of 750,000 members, but also of 62 Chapters and 380 local Groups through which those members can become engaged in effective local action.

But how effective are they? Do the elected leaders of local Groups and Chapters struggle along, doing the best they can, but not to be relied on when something “really” must get done? Or are they doing well – developing leaders, engaging members and asserting public influence? Do some perform better than others? If so, why? How do we know? As questions about the organization as a whole grow more specific, it has been clear that no one has known how to answer them, and certainly not in a way that offered the opportunity for learning.

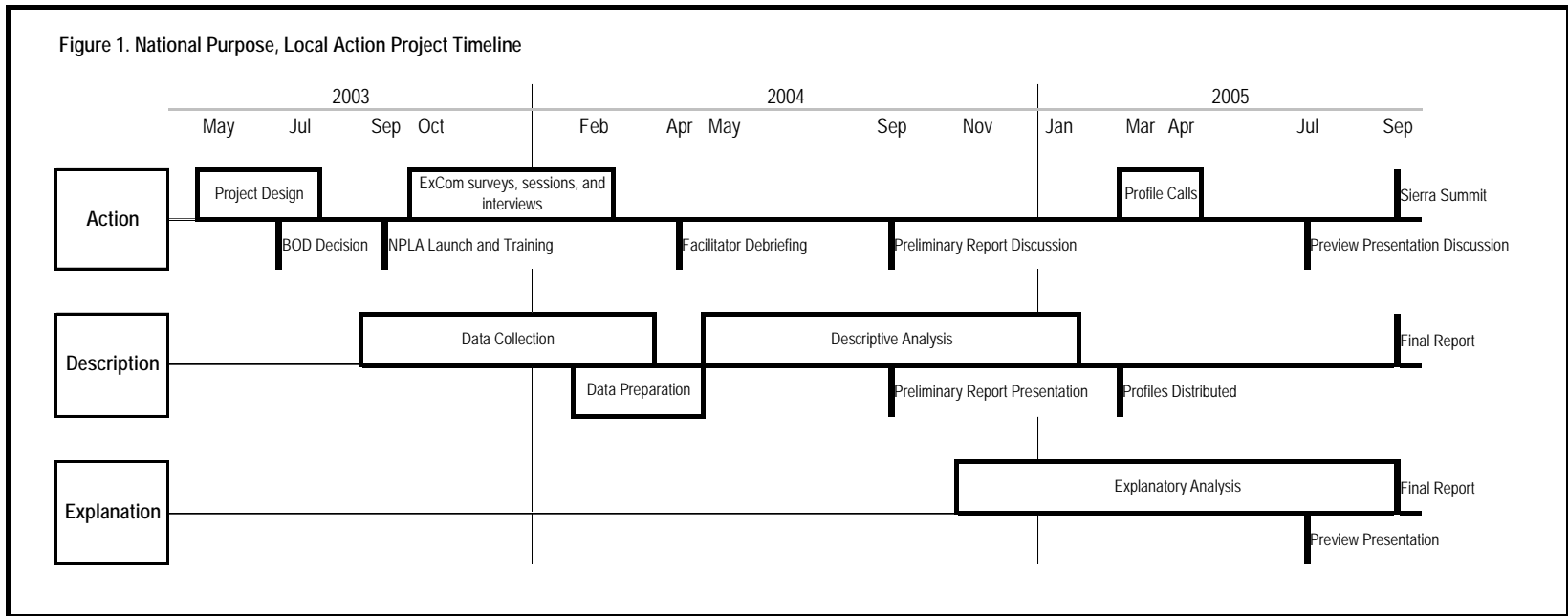
This project, then, which originated in the work of an OEGC task force led by Lisa Renstrom and Greg Casini, was initiated at the May 2003 board meeting, not only to answer the above questions, but also to mobilize volunteer leaders at all levels of the organization in getting the answers, reflecting on them, and acting on them – what we call description, explanation, and action.

We launched the project in September 2003 by training 130 volunteer facilitators who, over the course of the next 5 months, administered self-assessment surveys to 1650 ExCom members and led 280 ExCom self-assessment sessions (**Figure 1**, following page). We also interviewed 380 ExCom chairs, analyzed Sierra Club financial, staffing, and organizational data, and evaluated the ‘friendliness’ of each local community within which a Group or Chapter works.

We described what we found to the national leadership a year ago in a ‘preliminary report’ and provided individual profiles to each Group and Chapter ExCom for their review. The ‘final report’ explains our findings with a focus on implications for action.

This is only a beginning. The work of gaining a deep understanding of what needs to be changed, figuring out how to change it, and, most importantly, summoning up the will to change, only begins with this report. It is the leadership of the Sierra Club who will decide what to do, how much to do, and when to do it.

In this digest, we summarize our research questions, our findings, and their implications for action.



2. Questions

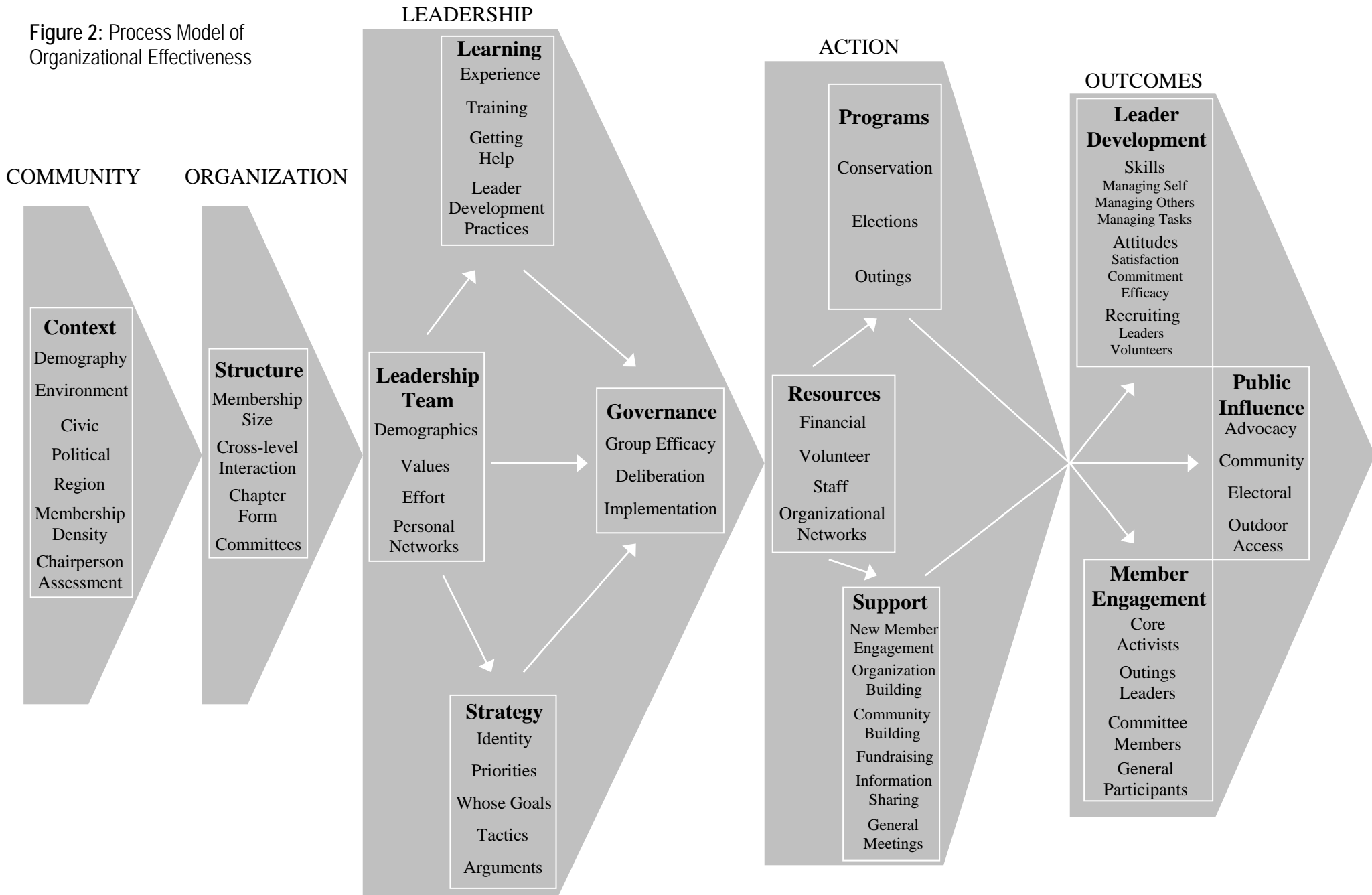
We evaluated the effectiveness of Groups and Chapters in three ways: leader development, member engagement, and public influence (**Figure 2**, following page)

- **Leader Development** means enhancing ExCom members' organizational skills, motivation, and ability to recruit new leaders on whom Groups or Chapters depend to build their capacity.
- **Member Engagement** describes the extent to which members participate directly in Group or Chapter work as core activists, leaders, and general participants. More participation leads to greater influence of every kind.
- **Public Influence** is the primary goal of most Groups and Chapters: assuring access to the outdoors, educating their community about environmental concerns, advocating on behalf of public policy reform, and electing officials who share the Sierra Club's agenda.

We looked for an explanation of these differences in effectiveness by investigating four families of organizational features:

- **Community Context** – the demographic, economic, political, and cultural characteristics of the communities in which Groups and Chapters are located, including the density of Sierra Club membership.
- **Organizational Structure** – how Groups and Chapters organize themselves and interact with one another, including the size of their membership and the number of their active committees.
- **Leadership** – the values and experience of the individual ExCom members, how they learn to lead, their strategy, and how well they govern themselves – deciding what to do and organizing themselves to do it.
- **Action** – mobilizing and deploying resources of money, time, and networks as support activities that include community building, organization building, and new member engagement; and as program activities that include conservation, electoral and outings work.

Figure 2: Process Model of Organizational Effectiveness



3. Findings

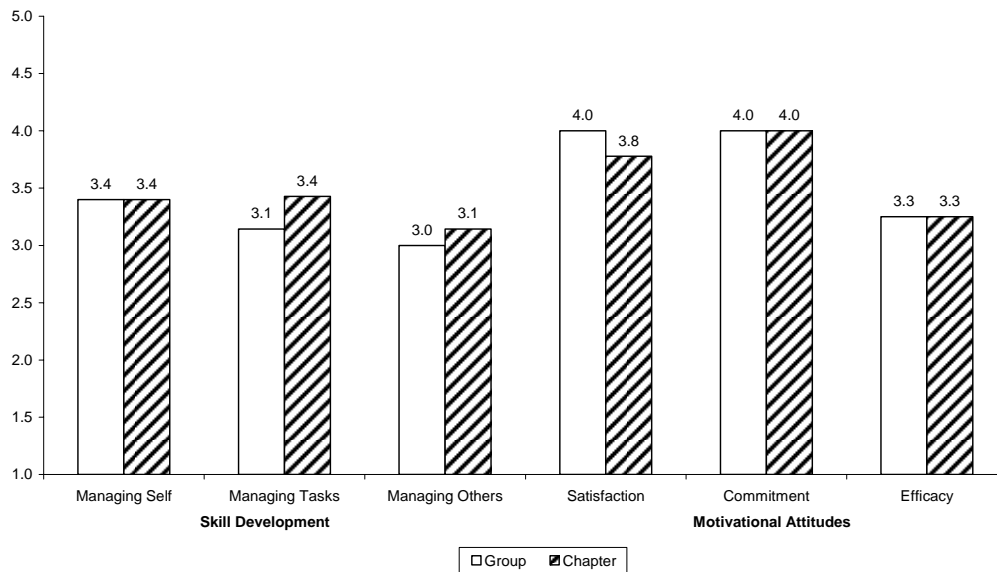
We report our findings about both Groups and the Chapters with which they are affiliated because they play very distinct roles in the organization: are structured differently, subject to different expectations, and can draw on different resources to meet them. On the other hand, because each is governed by an elected ExCom and engage in similar activities, they face similar challenges.

We learned that ExCom members' values of world-changing, social-recreation, and self-fulfillment drive their motivation to learn, the quality of ExCom governance, and their choice of programs. In terms of outcomes, we learned that:

- **Groups and Chapters do little to develop leaders, but could do far more.**

Although ExCom members are committed and draw satisfaction from their work, they learn little of the organizational skills they need to be effective: self-management, task-management, and most especially the skill of managing other people. Because it grows out of mastery of skills, they develop little sense of personal efficacy. (Chart 1 below). In other words, they feel more motivated to do the work than they feel competent to do it.

Chart 1: Skill Development and Motivational Attitudes Among Group and Chapter ExCom Members



They also enjoy limited success at recruiting new leaders. Only 10% of ExCom members recruit half of the new leaders being recruited and 70% of ExCom members recruited no new leaders at all (Chart 2, next page). Only 20% of the ExComs recruited enough leaders to more than replace themselves, while 44% of the Group ExComs and 25% of Chapter ExComs did not recruit enough new leaders to replace themselves.

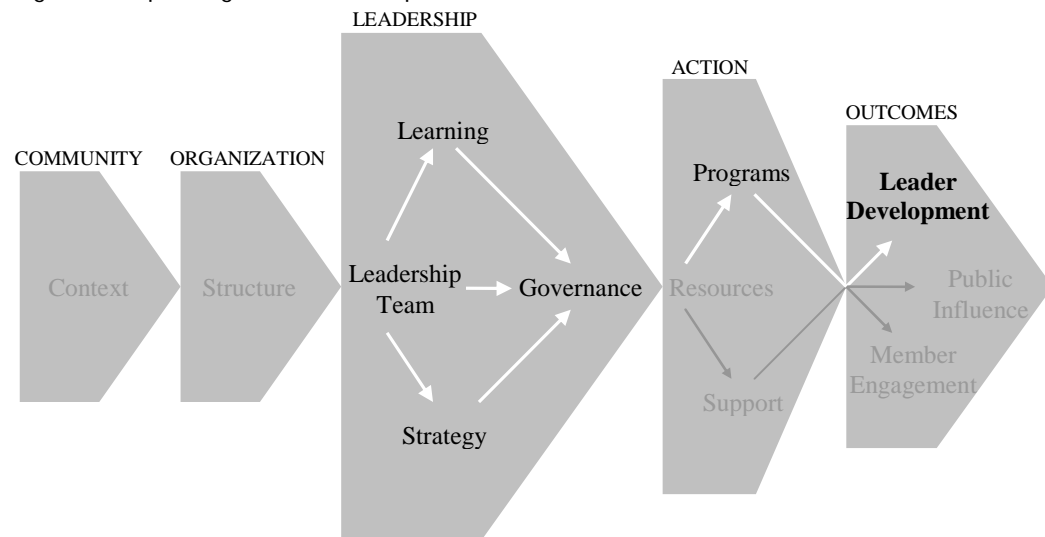
Chart 2: Concentration of Leader Recruitment - The Number of ExCom Members and the Number of Leaders They Recruited



We also learned why Groups and Chapters that develop leaders succeed.

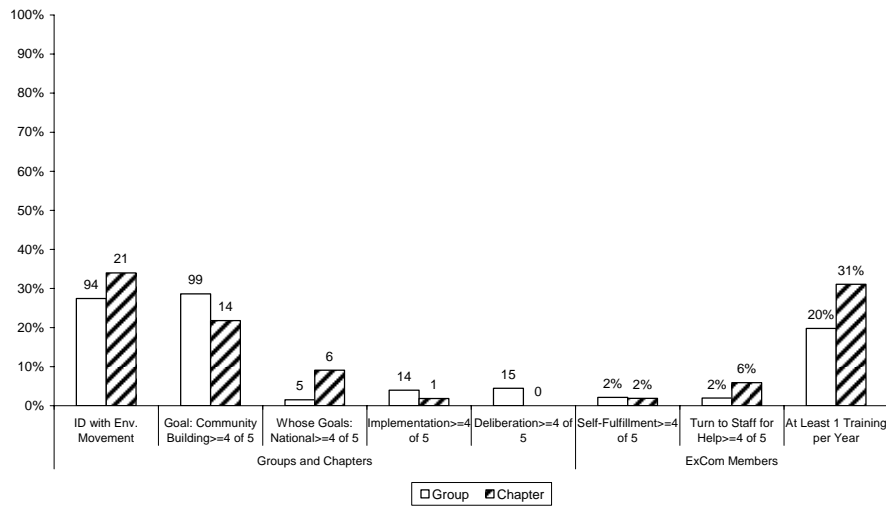
Successful ExComs identify with the environmental movement, not only with their local community; they also prioritize community building, and take national goals seriously. ExCom members learn to lead by interacting with other leaders, holding leadership positions, and participating in program activity. Those who learn the most, especially how to manage others, participate in a well-governed ExCom. Individuals who learn the most value self-fulfillment highly, although this is not a widely held value in the Sierra Club. They also get help from fellow ExCom members, accept coaching from locally-based staff, and attend formal training. **Figure 3** (below) summarizes the key components in the process of developing leaders.

Figure 3: Explaining Leader Development



But as **Chart 3** shows below, the number and percentage of Groups, Chapters or individuals who engage in the practices that encourage leader development is very limited. Only 14 Groups and 1 Chapter, for example, ranked above 4 on a 5-point scale evaluating implementation of decisions. And although most ExCom members attended at least one training session in the last 5 years, 37% of the Group members and 18% of Chapter members did not attend a single training session during that time. Only 20% of Group ExCom members and 31% of Chapter ExCom members attend one training session a year.

Chart 3: Groups, Chapters, and Individuals With Practices Encouraging Leader Development (% and Numbers)

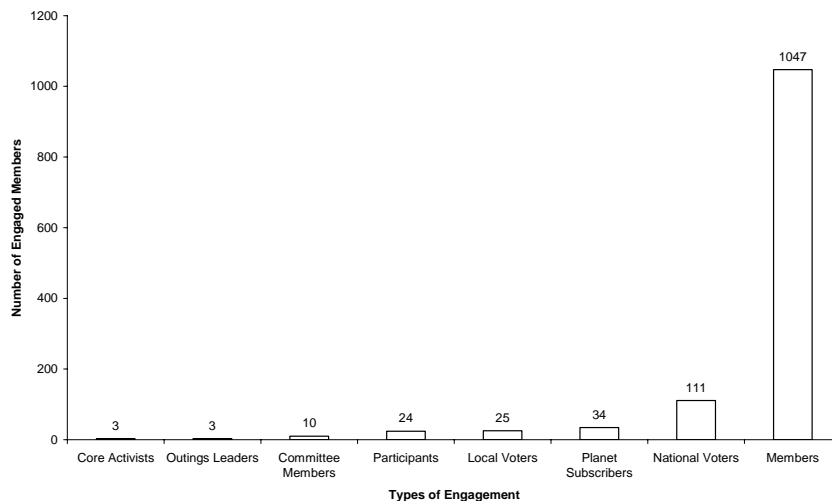


These practices are the exception, not the rule. It will take action to make them the rule.

- Chapters and Groups engage no more than 2% of their members in local action, but could engage many more.

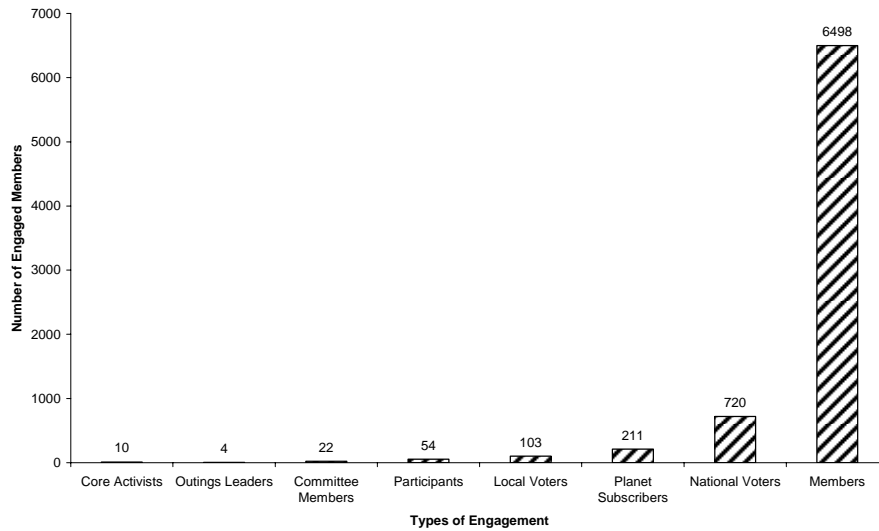
In the median Group of 1047 members, 111 or 11% vote in the national board elections, but only 24 members participate in local activities, 10 serve on committees, 4 lead outings, and 3 serve as core activists - people who commit 5 hours or more a week to the Sierra Club (**Chart 4a** below).

Chart 4a: Member Engagement in Groups



In the median Chapter of 6498 members, 720 vote in national elections, but only 54 members participate in Chapter activities, 22 serve on committees, 4 lead outings, and 10 serve as core activists (Chart 4b below).

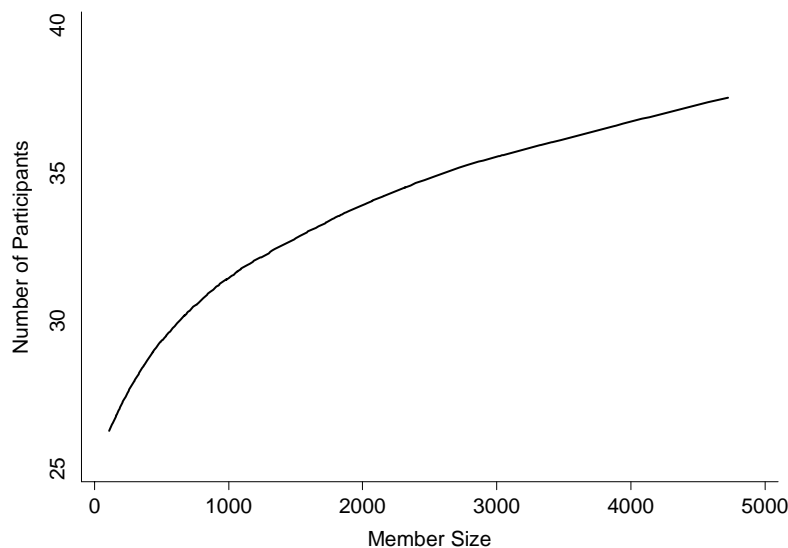
Chart 4b: Member Engagement in Chapters



We also learned why those Groups and Chapters that engage their members succeed.

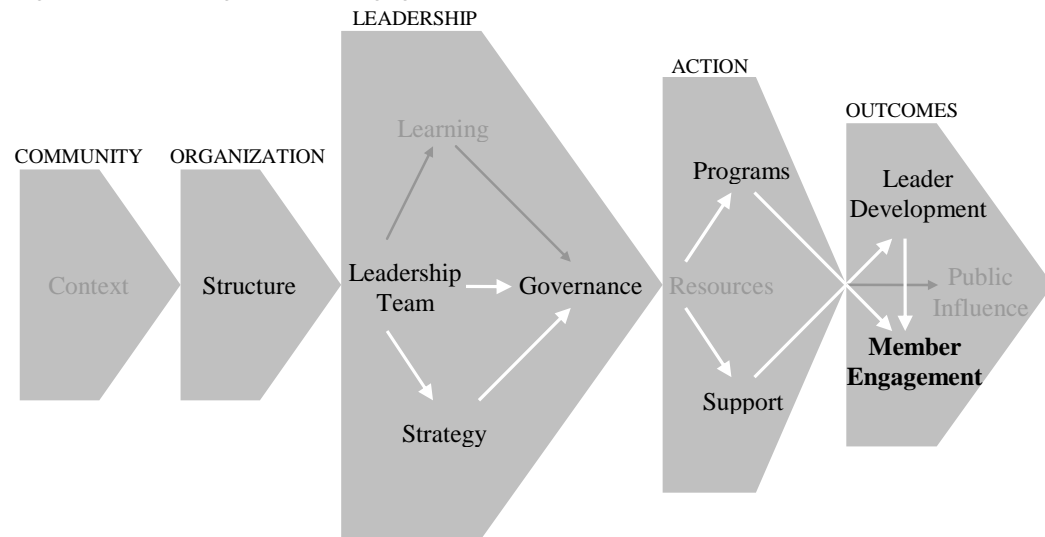
Although having more members to draw upon matters, the size of the membership beyond a certain point makes little difference in the number of members that become engaged (Chart 5a below). Two Groups of 1000 members each, for example, engage an estimated 64 participants or 32 each. But one group of 2000 members engages only 34 participants.

Chart 5a: Effect of Membership Size on the Number of Participants in Groups



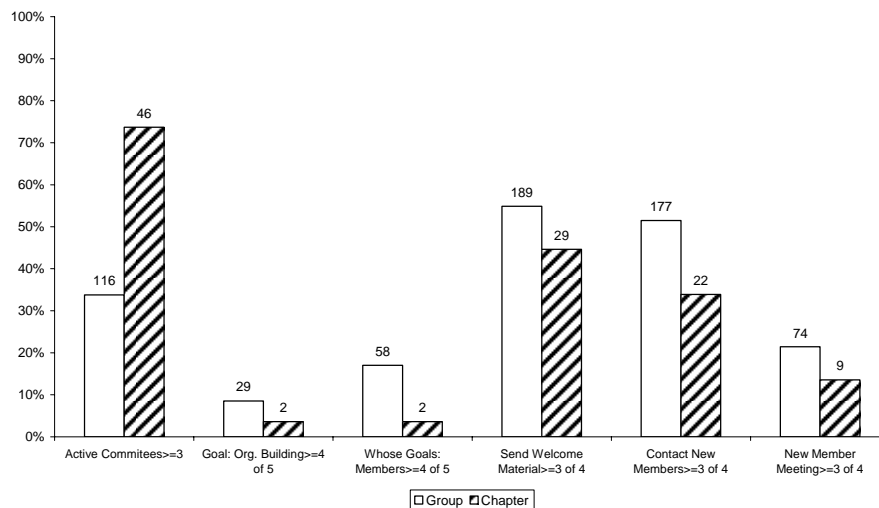
Core activists – and outings leaders – are the key to engaging participants in local activities. Chapters and Groups with more active committees or activity sections recruit more core activists. ExComs that focus on member interests, prioritize organization building, and conduct regular new member engagement activity, especially new member meetings, recruit more core activists, particularly if they can access local field staff. More core activists recruit more participants and generate more conservation and outings activity. And more activity creates the opportunity to engage more participants. The key factors in the process of engaging members are summarized in **Figure 4** below.

Figure 4: Explaining Member Engagement



But as **Chart 5b** shows below, the number and percentage of Groups or Chapters that engage in the practices that encourage member engagement is very limited. Only 29 Groups and 2 Chapters, for example, prioritize organization building goals. And although 46 Chapters have at least 3 active committees, 26% of Chapters and 66% of Groups have fewer than 3 active committees. Only about 20% of Groups and 15% of Chapters hold special meetings for new members, one of the most effective means for encouraging long-term engagement in the Club.

Chart 5b: Groups and Chapters With Practices Encouraging Member Engagement (% and #'s)

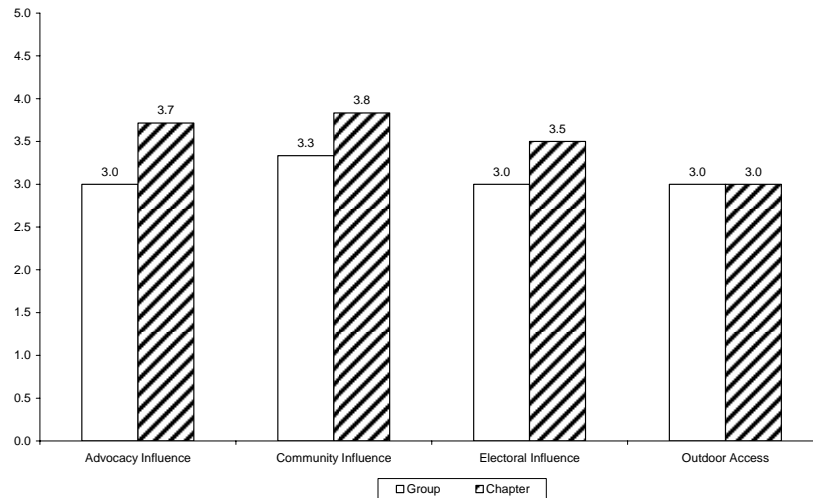


These practices are the exception, not the rule. It will take action to make them the rule.

- Chapters and Groups have widely varying, but limited, degrees of public influence, but could have more.

As shown in **Chart 6** below, we evaluated public influence in terms of advocacy, community recognition, elections, and access to the outdoors. Chapters enjoy more public influence than Groups do, except in gaining access to the outdoors. Both Groups and Chapters have the most community influence, but average only 3.5 on a 5-point scale. Their advocacy influence is more limited and their electoral influence, more limited still,

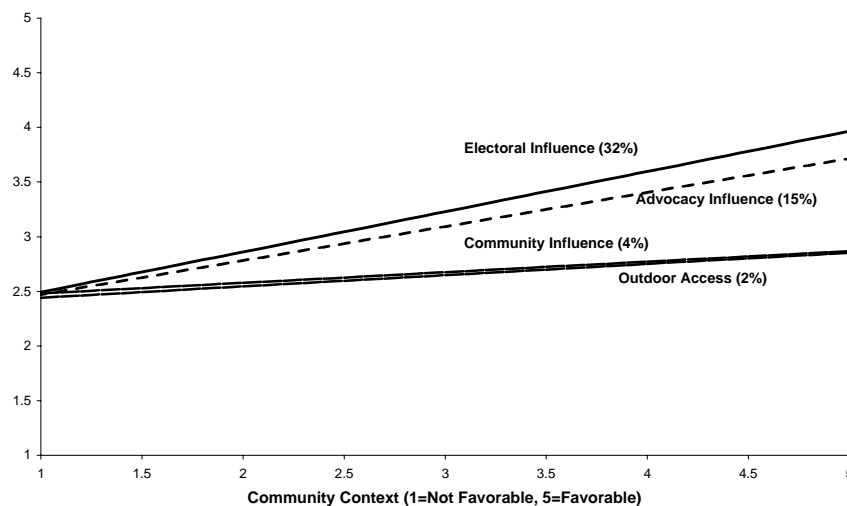
Chart 6: Public Influence in Groups and Chapters



We also learned why Groups and Chapters that exert more public influence succeed.

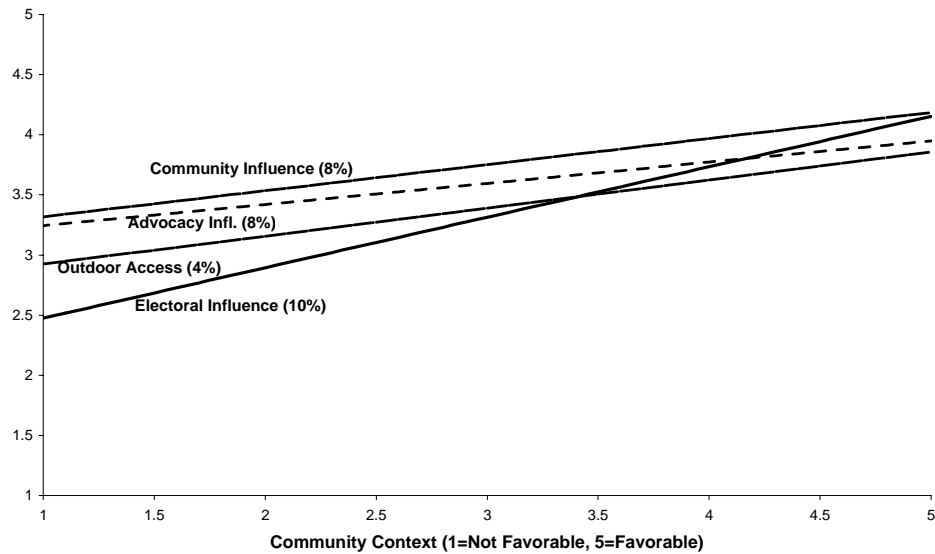
Although “friendliness” of community context matters, it matters less than many think. **Chart 7a** shows community “friendliness” on the horizontal axis and public influence on the vertical axis. Although the more supportive a community, the greater the public influence of the Group, “friendliness” accounts for only 32% of the variation in electoral influence, 15% of the variation in advocacy influence, 4% of variation in community influence and 2% of variation in outdoor access.

Chart 7a: Effect of Community Context on the Public Influence of Groups



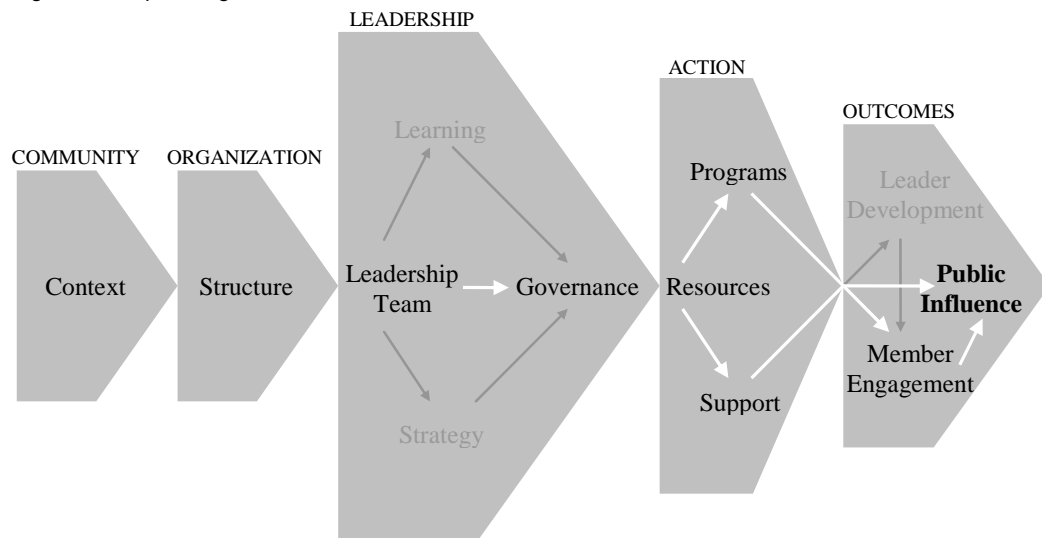
In Chapters, community context accounts for only 10% of the variation in electoral influence, 8% of the variation in advocacy and community influence, and 4% of the variation in outdoor access.

Chart 7b: Effect of Community Context on the Public Influence of Chapters



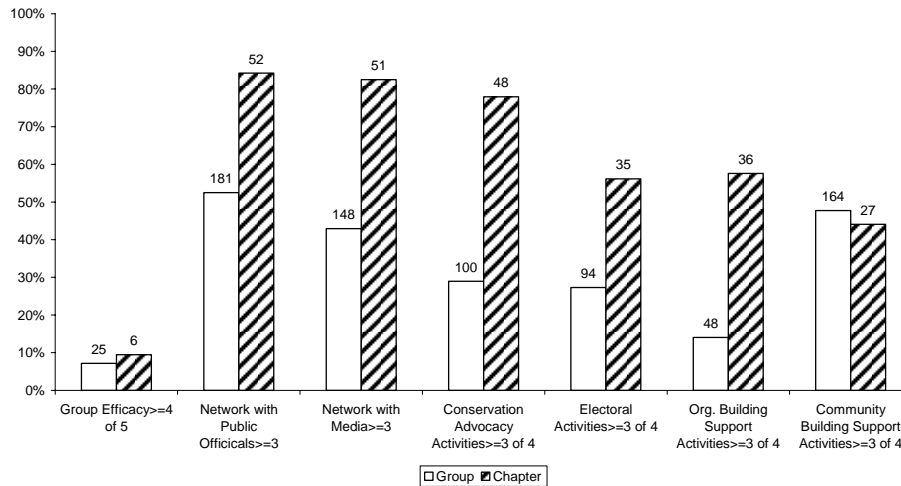
Groups and Chapters that do a good job of developing their leaders, engaging their members, and generating conservation, electoral and outings activity earn more Public Influence, even in an unfriendly environment. They support their work by networking with the broader community and by conducting organization building and community building activities. And they govern themselves well enough to approach their projects with a strong sense of group efficacy. The key factors in the process of earning Public Influence are summarized in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5: Explaining Public Influence



But as **Chart 8** shows below, the number and percentage of Groups or Chapters that engage in the practices that encourage public influence is limited – especially for Groups. Only 25 Groups and 6 Chapters, for example, ranked above 4 on a 5-point scale evaluating the ExCom’s sense of group efficacy. And although most Chapters regularly network with public officials and the media, roughly half of all Groups do not. Less than 50% of Groups and Chapters score above 3 on a 4-point scale evaluating the amount of community building activity they do, and only 26% of Groups score above 3 on organization building activity.

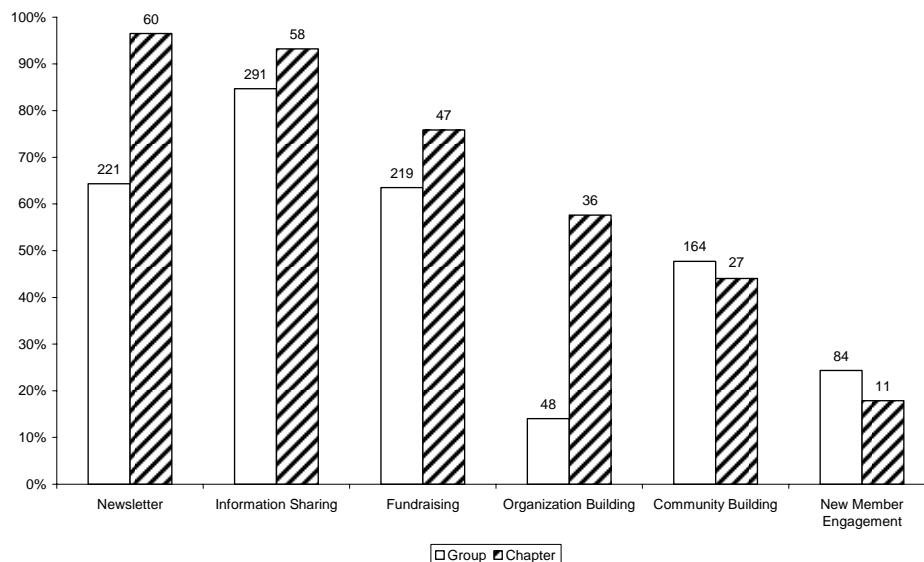
Chart 8: Groups and Chapters With Practices Encouraging Public Influence (% and #'s)



These practices too are the exception, not the rule. It will take action to make them the rule.

Finally, although most ExComs share information, especially newsletters, and raise funds, only fundraising influenced effectiveness. On the other hand, organization building (training, retreats), community building (social events, celebrations), and new member engagement all impact Group and Chapter effectiveness regardless of strategy, but are much less widely practiced (**Chart 9** below).

Chart 9: Support Activities in Groups and Chapters



4. Action

So what kind of action will it take? Our report points to 5 implications for action.

- **Commitment**

Commit the staff, financial and moral resources to developing effective Chapters and Groups. Affirm that development of the Club's volunteer leadership and the Chapters and Groups they lead is a critical investment in the strength of the organization as a whole and the environmental movement more broadly.

- **Governance**

Transform the governance practice of Group and Chapter ExComs by providing training in the skills of deliberation and implementation, establishing clear measures of performance and providing ongoing coaching by trained staff and leadership. A focus on governance will enhance the quality of leader development, member engagement and public influence.

- **Leader Development Program**

Establish leader identification, recruitment, and development programs in each Group and Chapter to (1) provide urgently needed training in organizational skills, especially in managing others; (2) engage new members through personal contact and regular meetings; (3) enact explicit leader development practices including identifying potential leaders, bringing them into new positions, and enhancing their skills, and (4) provide coaching and mentoring. A focus on leader development will enhance member engagement and public influence as well.

- **Group and Chapter Support Activity**

Review the ongoing support activity expected of each Group or Chapter. Information sharing, the most widely practiced support activity, has no relationship to variation in effectiveness, while activities with the most influence, such as new member engagement, are far less widely practiced.

- **Structural Reform**

Determine the structural changes that can best support effectiveness by examining the question of size, the extensiveness of opportunities for participation in committees and activities, considering arrangements that could make Chapter and Group interactions more productive, evaluating the contribution of activity sections and considering funding mechanisms to create greater incentives for community engagement.

The commitment called for above would have to be made by the national executive board. Its implementation, of course, would require the support of Chapters and Groups themselves.

Learning how to transform governance and leader development practices could be initiated by undertaking a pilot project with selected Chapters and Groups, at the same time creating the capacity to disseminate the approaches developed throughout the organization.

Determining the appropriate structural reforms, including expected support activity, could be initiated by charging a committee to produce a set of clear recommendations.

5. Conclusion

None of what we suggest will be easy, but neither is it overwhelmingly complex – it is just plain hard. But the Sierra Club is not starting from scratch: its people have a vision of the world as they would like it to be, a depth of experience of grappling with the world as it is, and the values, the willingness to work, and the imagination to make it happen. What this work most requires is a clear-eyed commitment to the proposition that the only way the Sierra Club can fulfill its national purpose at this point in time is to invest its financial, staff, and moral resources in developing its leaders, enhancing its organizational capacity, and conducting programs of effective local action – rekindling the movement that the Sierra Club played such a key role in launching.

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