

Community Centers

Contents

Questions to Ask	4
Finding Space	6
Zoning	6
Location	6
Essential Services	7
Information and Public Outreach	7
Atmosphere	7
Education, Seminars, and Events	7
Website	9
Radical Printing	9
Internet	9
Media Center, Podcasting, and Broadcasting	10
Attrition	11
Anti-Counterinsurgency	12
Identifying Plants	12
Types of Plants:	13
Preventing and Foiling Plants	14
Bugging	14
Security Culture	14
Sabotage, Thievery, and Embezzlement	16

Corpgov and the rich at least have one thing right: If you have a large group of like-minded folks who are all into the same things, a central gathering place can be both a recruitment incentive and a great tool.

Consider for a second the country club. Basically, for the wealthy and those who like to go into debt slavery pretending to be wealthy, it is a central gathering place located on golf courses in the middle of McMansion communities. Here, there is no need for someone to trash up their house hosting large parties and have to clean up. Instead, everybody who lives in the neighborhood pitches in (sometimes a vast sum) to have a shared event space, a private bar, and all they can take of their favorite activity. That is, without dealing with unsympathetic folks like downtrodden workers who's jobs and pensions they marched off with showing up.

Good thing is, that this can work for any group of folks. It does not have to be golf. It can be everything from your own commune compound out in the boondocks using techniques talked about in Rural Living to a reclaimed storefront out of an abandoned strip mall to a full fledged office! All successful and long lived activist groups eventually get a long term office and center. The really well established groups have centers worldwide. The radical eco-activists of Green Peace even have a compound in Antarctica and naval operations!

A good focus with reliable people will make fund raising easier. Possible focuses include environmental organizations, services to the homeless, religious services, communes, and alternative education. Start small. If your cause is worthy, it may spread and blossom and cause real change.

Questions to Ask

- Do you really want the headache and responsibility?

Some things seem really cool until the person that starts it realizes they are now “married” to their organization long after it stops being cool and exciting. Are you going to feel enthusiastic when one guy in your commune sleeps with another person’s girl and you have some folks (good, contributing members) threaten to leave over it and YOU have to put out the fire? Are you willing to pay the bills for the lights and rent out of your pocket when folks use the services but do not want to or can not help contribute? Are you willing to be “the bad guy” if you have to ask someone who is not compatible with everyone else to leave? Are you going to trudge onward if a close associate who was trusted spends the donation money on heroin and skips town? Are you willing to deal with backlash if one of the members of your radical ecological organization blows up a logging truck and starts bragging to cops that he hangs out with your people?

- Do you want to start from scratch or is it more convenient to just start a chapter of an existing organization?

Answer this for yourself. If the existing group has good brand recognition and a good reputation, just establishing a chapter of this in your local area can be easier than starting from scratch. Many even have programs and may send down representatives to help. However, these organizations sometimes can also be rife with internal politics, egotistical leaders, and corruption not seen by the average member. Some may demand percentages of your donations to support the main chapter without care of if you can keep your own chapter afloat. You will be forced to tow the entire organization line, even if you disagree with parts of it. There have been cases of even powerful organizations collapsing or spitting due to drama and getting a bad reputation by the overall community regardless of how well you were doing locally! For some causes, there may be no organization available. Meet face to face representatives of any group you join forces with beforehand. It may be a good match or save you from dealing with much stress.

- Are you willing to start small?

Sometimes, the path of many miles begins with a small step. You may have to start out having meetings at other people’s houses, a library, or someone else’s facility who may not mind.

- Is this some wild, out of the blue solo idea or are you a trusted, longtime member within a huge network of folks who share your beliefs?

Any huge project like this goes much better if you already know tons of folks who may be supportive. But of course, the “if you build it, they will come” maxim does have virtue. If your idea is good, you give good services, and have a trustworthy reputation (or if you are the only game in town) you still may be successful. One word on “support”, though. There is a huge difference between vocally supporting an idea and being willing to actually donate time, action, and money to that effort.

- Do you have access to cash and/or skilled volunteer labor and materials?

Even if you rent, you are going to need deposits. You may have to spend money for renovations to make the place suitable for your purposes. If you luck out, this can be as simple as just coat of paint and getting furniture. Some places may need major high skill electrical or plumbing work or in bad cases, foundation work. It may even be necessary to build an entire complex from the ground up or at least get a bunch of trailers until you can build such a complex!

- Are people going to be sleeping or living there?

If so, you need to make sure the zoning is okay and you have the facilities necessary for tenants. Having only one bathroom for 36 folks can cause tensions. You probably want to have some way of dealing with people eating. You need to make sure everyone is going to get along. You are going to set reasonable but strict ground rules so cops do not come in and bust in the doors for some fool bragging about his pot growing, some asshole getting drunk and punching holes all in the walls and his girlfriend, or some jerk stealing from everyone else.

- What kind of services is your center going to offer?

An earthy, green, farming retreat is going to have much different needs than an urban religious center. It is best to start small if on a limited budget. For example, if your center is a day time drop-in center for wayward youth you may envision pool tables, fully stocked libraries, and a staff of 4 counselors, and a full kitchen serving meals. But, until you take off on fund raising you may have to cope with one or two staff, a bunch of dumpster dived couches, a few recycled 8 year old computers, and a cheap linksys router hooked to internet.

Finding Space

Zoning

If you are setting up shop in an urban area, look into what is allowed both by zoning law and by your rental contract (if you rent). There are occupancy limits in most buildings and most commercial zoning prohibits dwelling in the office. Find out what your rights are as far as having demonstrations with many people inside and/or outside. Can you place sign and tables on the sidewalk (if there even is a sidewalk)? Is there a place that is acceptable for your clientele to park cars and bicycles without having to pay or pissing off other businesses or land owners?

If you are setting up in a rural area, you may not have to worry about this as much, but you will still need to make sure you have the facilities on the land that suits your purposes or that the folks coming have understandings of what to bring.

Location

If in a city, you will need to find a space near your identified focus population in order to be effective. Bohemian earthy folks are going to frown on going to a Yoga center in the middle of the suburbs and away from their trendy habitat with 6 USD coffee and expensive bookstores. An inner city homeless ministry may do best in areas near day labor and bus lines. Look for something easy to find, near major streets, public transportation, and easily bicycle accessible.

The exception to this is if your center is in a rural area where the entire selling point may be “getting away from it all”. In this case, you will want to invest in a working center van to pick up folks who may not have access to a ride or for occasional supply runs to the nearest town.

Regardless of location, it is important to consider the political atmosphere, crime, and law enforcement attitudes in the area. For example, you are begging for trouble if you put an adult homeless shelter near a four star hotel (real life example: the Brantley Baptist Center homeless shelter in downtown New Orleans had massive trouble with this and had to shut down because the surrounding upscale 300 USD a night hotels did not like their customers around the smelly homeless waiting outside for a bed!) or if you hold a massive pagan worship event right smack in a small, secluded Bible belt rural parish or county! (real life example: Livingston Parish in the middle part of Louisiana had one such gathering on a private field. County cops searched and harassed attendees along with the local paper and church groups railing against them!) Of course, sometimes you may want trouble to make a statement. But just be prepared for it.

Essential Services

Regardless of type, almost all communes, centers, and organizations offer these services. An organization that does not offer any services but to ask for donations has no reason to exist, and will be avoided and eventually die.

Information and Public Outreach

A good center always has information on services around the community that the clientele has interest in. They strive to be local experts in the theme they deal with and constantly pay attention to developing news and advances. A youth center knows what GED programs are out there. The rural agriculture commune knows the services in the nearest major towns and keeps a base of knowledge on farming. A drug advocacy group has the names of many sympathetic lawyers and keeps a good rapport with them, maybe even asking them to come speak. A disability support group has tons of information and lists of services and good doctors for those with that disability, and so on.

Atmosphere

A good community center is a place where people feel comfortable to come and hang out to meet other progressive types and coordinate the more overt parts of our struggle for freedom. Have comfortable seating. Try to have food available to visitors. If you have trouble with funding for this, some businesses are willing to donate day old foods (and many times fresh) to a worthy cause. Of course, a good website, letterhead letters, and business cards make you just that more legit. Make sure to hit up places that may share your sympathies. Late hours and free strong coffee are always good for encouraging deep radical discussion.

Education, Seminars, and Events

Community education and planned events can provide a great stream of recruits. Great ideas include:

- Group meditation or yoga
- Free university classes/ GED classes
- How-to seminars.
- Martial Arts classes.
- Literature study group or book of the week club.
- Religious functions, if it fits and is optional... be it Christian, Taoist, Pagan, Flying Spaghetti Monster or whatever.

- “Conversation and coffee” discussion panels.
- Good guest speakers who have great knowledge in their field other than the organization leadership.
- Parenting classes or daycare/ kids classes.
- Member shared free dinners or lunches and potlucks.

What is a good idea in one place may not fly in another. It is important to have these always at regular, scheduled times and post these schedules on a bulletin board, any printed literature, and your website. Interesting topics will draw groups better than rambling sermons. If successful, you will bring in folks to utilize the space. Folks are much more likely to give donations to help pay the rent and upkeep if they are getting some benefit and the commune or center becomes a central part of life they look forward to. The whole “obligation because it is a good cause” thing only goes so far.

Sometimes it is important just to have events that allow folks to get to know each other without one-way communication like speeches or presentations. Give your members a chance to socialize between each other. This is one of the downfalls of many organizations, particularly many religious based organizations, that has led to drops in memberships and even many places closing.

Even if it is a “captive” audience like homeless ministries or you have a retreat in the woods with no way out without a car or long trek, many will be left with bad tastes in their mouths if any event is only an ego trip or you insult their intelligence. They will speak ill of your organization and any group remotely affiliated even years later. (real life example: In Phoenix, Arizona there was a religious based mission called Teen Challenge. They maintained large, dormitory style buildings for kids coming off of hardcore drugs. Now, some one way conversations and strict but reasonable rules can be understandable when rehabilitating hormone ridden teenagers with hardcore drug withdrawal. A good thing, right? However, they also occasionally had public feedings to homeless people if a “short” sermon and prayer was attended. What they would do was horrible and very disrespectful. The sermon would last TWO HOURS and have nothing to do with any plight the homeless faced! Instead, it consisted of only of self-congratulatory awards and acceptance speeches! The homeless were forced to sit and endure while forced to sit in the back of the room. If they left the building during this sermon, even to smoke, they were told they would not be able to eat. Some angrily protested this derogatory treatment and were promptly escorted out by off duty police for being disruptive. Afterward, the meal consisted of watered down Kool-aid and a soggy sandwich. Do you think anyone there except those who were part of the program were made into tithing converts? Do you think anyone there except the organizers saw this as a great thing for the community? Or did they just go along for the food or to get the hell out of there if they were locked down in the program and it was the only game in town?)

You may be tempted to do singles events. Do not do it. It is usually not a good idea most of the time. It creates tension of having to find mates and attracts those who may not give two shits about your activist agendas and only want to get laid! If the meeting is heterosexual, it creates problems of constantly needing to balance the male/female ratio in recruiting or else risk having people not want to show up because “there are no hot, non-loser guys” or “no girls but the one 40 year old in the corner with 3 kids” type deal. Even “free love”/ polyamory/ open relationship groups that actually make sex and dating an agenda constantly guard against this, many times only allowing married men who bring wives or single females in - no single guys allowed ever unless it is leadership. Instead, do a “coffee and conversation” type event. It is much, much better and much less stress, and you may actually get just that - great conversation!. If folks are just happening to hook up with others they meet in a community center, awesome. But, do not make it the selling point of coming there - lest it drown out the message.

Website

While word of mouth and fliers still have uses, most folks are going to find out about your project through some sort of online presence. This means a website. Your website should sum up the organization's philosophy, current events, news, and contact information. The great ones serve as a download center for .pdfs of all written material. If you have interesting speakers or how-to seminars, you can put archives up with mp3 podcasts or links to youtube to present your organization as a cool place.

You can also, if you wish, put up discussion boards for that extra touch. Just make sure they are maintained by someone and moderated to prevent Chinese spam flooders, flammers, and trolls from opposing philosophies that only agitate without discussing things rationally from taking over. The forums for some organizations can eventually become THE forum to go to for good discussions of that issue.

The website needs to look fairly sharp, so if you do not know how to do this, you may need to pay someone or enlist the help of a technically savvy friend or volunteer. A shitty and cluttered website that is never updated, has misspellings and broken links, or is nothing but a facebook or myspace profile is not going to cut it and actually can chase away folks who may have otherwise checked you out.

You should also sign your place up on sites that are established to help folks find your center. There are database sites aimed at every possible flavor of center. Sometimes multiple sites.

Radical Printing

Newsletters may be getting less common due to the internet, but there is always something to be said for a tangible piece of paper in one's hand to read over the cold, white glare of a monitor. You can place these in places where your target crowd may gather. Just get permission from whoever controls that space so your efforts do not get tossed in the trash right after you leave. You may even want to establish a mailing list for folks that enjoy reading. Of course, always offer your newsletter in .pdf form on your website! Just make sure your newsletter is well written with good logic and looks professional. If it is good, you may find it referenced and quoted or even used by smaller groups just forming far away.

Putting out fliers and pamphlets are a bit like spreading seed. Most are going to be viewed once, thrown in the trash or on the ground. It is pretty wasteful. During Mardi Gras in New Orleans in Jackson Square one year, locals commented that there were more Christian pamphlets tossed on the ground there from various missionary groups handing them out than beer cans from the bars! However, if the flier is well written and well done, you will find you may get one or two responses (sometimes more) from around every 100 of them. Of course, always keep fliers and pamphlets in your center containing lists of services, directions, and any information you want known.

Quality posters are another great way to advertise. If it is a great piece of art, as well as provide a statement, folks will gladly pay for it to put on their wall. Some of the protest and community organization posters of the 1960s and 1970s are now historical collectables worth quite a bit of money to collectors.

See also *Starting a Printing Workshop* and *Underground Newspapers* for more tips.

Internet

You can surely set up a public wireless Internet node. Additionally, a few old machines plugged into the network will let anyone without laptops get online to publish and blog.

Media Center, Podcasting, and Broadcasting

A good podcast, live presentation, youtube account, or even old school air wave broadcast can be a major selling point to your organization!

Try to get a computer projector, overhead projector, and possibly a large television screen and playback device for multimedia presentations. Recording equipment, lights, a modular TV set, and several backgrounds make for professional panel discussions, radio shows, and documentaries. Most of the media studio stuff is quite expensive and easily damaged. Expensive stuff with direct pawn value are popular targets for thieves (even by trusted project volunteers!) , particularly if your area is very public. For security, take home the gear at night or have it locked and watched.

If your movement is looking to produce a guerrilla radio program or podcast, a nice studio with good acoustics will really help in production and sound quality. Make sure the host knows how to talk professionally without “umms” or dead air. Nothing makes listeners cut the podcast or channel off and never listen to your message again than poor quality audio with bad voices and stuttering.

Do not try to transmit a pirate radio transmission from the community center. It will be a very easy investigation and you might forfeit without even a trail all of your expensive studio equipment as part of the crime of pirate broadcast. This is a concern even if your organization has the transmitter gear off site. Let someone else broadcast your Internet audio feed, just be sure that people know the FCC will probably watch all IP addresses connecting to your site, TOR might help with this. Also remember security culture such as recording a how-to video of how to grow pot done with actual plants grown in your area by a member if you live in an place where this is illegal, you could end up squeezed to out people by a grand jury under threat of jail for contempt of court.

Music is usually okay to put in if the show is broadcast or streamed live. If it is later put in an archive podcast, you will need to either have music that is open sourced or you have permission from the artist to use. All others you probably should edit out in the archive version. The RIAA, the same folks that sue grandma for her house because her grand daughter downloaded Brittany Spears on peer to peer, have been known to harass podcasters and event organizers from time to time.

See also Making Music and Guerrilla Broadcasting.

Attrition

Over time, folks may lose interest - even productive, long term members. Maybe they get a new job that takes up their time. Maybe they have a new baby. People move and interests can change. This is natural.

However, if you are losing too many members quickly, you may want to seriously examine what you are doing. Is your area of concern not relevant anymore? Has the population shifted or your ideal no longer a fad? Are you not advertising enough? Do you have poisonous members (and this means even leadership!) showing up and chasing everyone away because no one can stand that person?

Always be open to feedback and be approachable. Criticism is an incredibly valuable gift because they could have just left and never came back without even giving you a clue what is happening. Be ready to change an approach that may be hindering you, cancel unpopular events, or be willing to drop or counsel a problem member.

Avoid “cults of personality” and let everyone have a say. Have others who can take over things if something unfortunate happens to you.

(Real world example: Back during the 1970s, Abbie Hoffman had the Yippies and Kerry Thorton had the Discordians. Both groups had similar goals and aims and had polite relations, if not different approaches. However, decades later, the Yippies are a footnote in counterculture history and the Discordians are very much still around. Why is that? For one thing, Yippie stands for Youth International Party, meaning if you are pushing 30 or beyond it implies you may not be welcome, even if you agree with the philosophy. Discordians made no distinction. While that may keep out some, and there are some groups based on youth that have centers like fraternities or student organizations, it is not the only reason. The main reason is cult of personality and someone willing to help run things other than the founder. Abbie Hoffman and one of his buddies were pretty much “THE LEADERS” and had no room for individual chapters or any one else to add to the collective body of knowledge. Thorton, on the other hand, let anyone with something legitimate to add be heard. Hence the Yippies faded with the death of Hoffman when no more bestseller books came out while the Principia Discordia has many versions (the newest only vaguely resembling Thorton’s early work) and a newer work called “The Black Iron Prison” has been added long after Thorton died. When running a group, look at it not so much that you are “the leader”, but more a fellow member and friend facilitating good things happening. The members are the stars. Martial Arts groups have a saying, “The white belt is king, the black belts stay after and mop floors.”)

Anti-Counterinsurgency

Some centers may attract the attention of opposition groups or even CorpGov agents and pigs looking to shut people down for crimes real or imagined.

Identifying Plants

Types of Plants:

- Groups who have a similar mission, but want to recruit from your members instead of cold recruiting.

<http://wiki.stealthiswiki.org/wiki/Community-Centers> 7/9

- Opposing groups who want to know your plans to develop counter plans.
- Undercover cops and agents. Particularly found in drug legalization circles or radical circles that have a tendency to use DIRECT action against established powers. Do not think your group is immune because it is borderline mainstream, either. They have even been known to infiltrate radical Baptist anti- abortion groups as well as hardcore anarchist G20 protest groups from time to time.

Properly teaching security culture can make a big difference if the police or groups who may be opposed to your mission are sending plants into your community center. This gets quite a bit harder the more people frequent your center.

Preventing and Foiling Plants

- Enforce a “no open talk of violence or illegal activity” policy. Open discussion of lawbreaking is permissible discussion ONLY if it is in a detached academic sense and not planning actions.
- This includes DOING illegal actions in the center during public meetings. Example: even if your group is a drug advocacy group or even friendly to the idea, it is never done in a public setting or even talked about. This includes someone planning to “turn everyone on with a big blunt at his house” after the meeting and announcing this. Keep stuff like this on the down low and only amongst established long time friendships in private areas, preferably away from the community center. That new guy who has only been there two weeks or so could very well be a cop or a opposing group member who would love to get some regular, important members busted!
- Be watchful of those that constantly are attempting to violate security culture and the above rules. If they continue to disobey this even after gentle reminders, you may need to boot them.
- Be cautious of those who seem to hang out waiting to talk to new arrivals but not to regulars.
- Try to greet and to talk to everyone who enters to get a feel for their motives and reason of being there. Not only is this good hospitality and makes folks feel welcome, it is a good security measure.

Bugging

Always assume that your phones, internet, and building are all bugged or tapped. Modern spy gadgets are cheap and easy for the police and opposing groups to get. If you need to have a secure discussion, take a walk along a busy street.

Security Culture

Make security culture a major focus of the culture in your community center. Making and posting motivational posters similar to the posters from World War Two will be a constant reminder and a great idea. The legality and ability to stay open depends on following security culture rules if any of your regulars are involved in direct action.

Always separate the center or commune from any direct actions of it’s members. This works regardless of philosophy or theme. Radical Islamic mosques in the Middle East may have had several members that blew up things, but the mosque itself remains faultless. Similarly, during the anti-abortion protests of the 1980s and 1990s, a few folks vandalized those clinics and there was even the case of a few abortion doctors getting shot! Of course, the Baptist church they went to and the pro-life organization they frequented are always blameless, even if many sympathized with such direct actions! This is because **they NEVER allowed public discussion or planning of ANY direct action (except in academic, detached discussions) in public meetings!**

If it works for big organizations like the Southern Baptists or the Islamic Mosques, it will work for your center, too.

See Security Culture for more tips.

Sabotage, Thievery, and Embezzlement

DO NOT STEAL FROM YOUR RADICAL COMMUNITY CENTERS AND BOOK STORES

Many of those that we wish to serve are of a subculture that views stealing from "Da-Man" as being a revolutionary act. Since the stealing instinct sometimes becomes ingrained, you need to take special care that valuables are not accessible to visitors. Unfortunately, this often means not carrying a stock of merchandise since much of it will go out stuffed in pockets and backpacks.

Bars on windows, backed up files and computers, and a good sprinkler system as well as paid up insurance are important. Good inventory control on anything that is given out like food for meals is also in order. Some places even go as far as to require that any donations must be given as a money order made out to the center to cut back on those who would be tempted to leech off the funds.

Take all these things into account should the police, industry, or even a disillusioned former member decide to eliminate your radical meeting space.



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