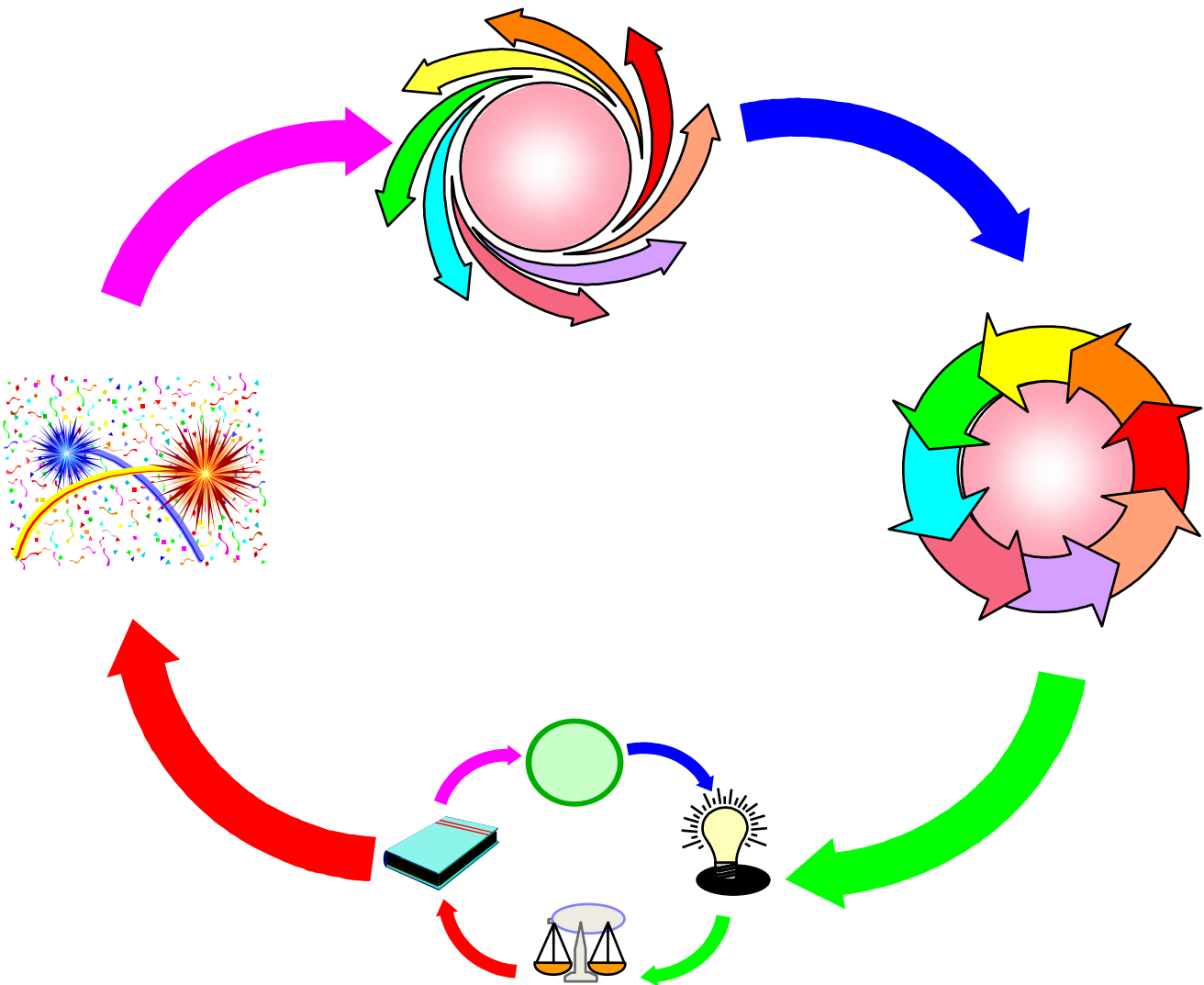


# GROUP ACTION PLANNING



**THE ROAD TO  
SUCCESS**

# Group Action Planning Tips

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## What is Group Action Planning?

Group Action Planning (GAP) occurs when a group of family, friends, community citizens, and/or professionals dynamically support a target person's decision-making and the decision-making of each other to insure that the target person experiences quality of life according to his or her own preferences, interests, strengths, needs, and great expectations.

## How Can You Create an Action Group?

### Inviting Support

1. Identify someone to facilitate the new group. The role of the facilitator is a key one because the facilitator makes sure all other tasks are carried out. The facilitator needs to be a person whom the target person and family trusts, is willing to make a commitment to being a part of a reliable alliance, has strong communication skills, and is able to connect verbally and emotionally with all group members.
2. Identify the family members, friends, community citizens and professionals who are already involved in the target person's life. Think through how each has contributed to supporting him or her.
3. Consider people with strong emotional connections.
4. Be guided by the target person's preferences, interests, strengths, needs, and great expectations in selecting group members.
5. Issue invitations to join the group. Do this after you have considered a whole range of people. Invitations can come from the target person, family, facilitator, and/or any group member. One way to extend the invitation is to invite people to come to the first meeting to find out more about what is involved. By giving them a chance to participate in a meeting and meet others prior to making a definite commitment, you give them more information about what is involved. You also should tell them from the outset that, if action group participation does not work out for them for any reason, they can always withdraw from participation.

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6. Let everyone know that people can join at any time. You may discover new people to add, as new preferences, interests, strengths, needs, and great expectations emerge.

### **Creating Connections**

7. Let each individual know how valuable his or her support is. Affirm the positive contributions and strengths of everyone. If some people tend to “be on the fringe” of the group, seek ways to get them more involved and to help them be connected.
8. Create a sense of connectedness. Help people enjoy themselves, feel comfortable, and develop a sense that they, too, can derive support from this reliable alliance.
9. Listen for and celebrate the special events and occasions in the lives of group members. For example, when someone in the group experiences personal or professional success, acknowledge and celebrate it. When sadness occurs in the lives of group members, provide consolation and support. Create a sense of caring for everyone in the group.
10. Create an informal atmosphere for socialization throughout the meetings. Have food and drinks available. Arrange seating so that it is comfortable, e.g., people sitting in a circle in a living room or family room, as contrasted to sitting around a table.
11. Infuse laughter and joy into each gathering. Avoid somberness.
12. Turn a crisis into an opportunity. Experiencing a crisis can help create a sense of reliable alliance when people have an opportunity to share disappointment, hurt, and frustration. Often target persons and their families have been conditioned to keep their major worries to themselves and to conceal their biggest challenges. When a crisis happens, the more you share with the group and are open about your feelings, the more the group has an opportunity to respond and to create a sense of truly being a reliable alliance. Remember that every crisis is an opportunity for stronger connections and for more creative problem-solving.

### **Sharing Great Expectations**

13. Encourage the target person and his or her family to share their own great expectations for the future. These great expectations should primarily evolve from the target person’s preferences, interests, strengths, and needs, but also from the preferences, interests, strengths, and needs of the family and other reliable allies who will be providing the bulk of the support. Each group member can share his or her own great expectations. Group members can affirm and even embellish the great expectations of others by asking “what if” and “why not.” Avoid allowing disability, even significant disability, to prevent valued great expectations from being explored. Remember that more support can often enable seemingly impossible great expectations to be realized.

14. Listen throughout all group interaction for the expression of great expectations and acknowledge and underscore those when they are shared.
15. Recognize that great expectations evolve over time. The great expectations that the target person, family, and other group members have at the beginning may seem like only moderate or even low expectations at a later time. Thus, the evolution of expectations should be viewed as an exciting and dynamic process.
16. Seek to stay open to ideas that truly push the limits of possibilities. Encourage seemingly outlandish thinking. Hold back from dismissing options simply because you've never heard of a person with a disability who has had success with the option. Embrace the opportunity to be a pioneer.

### **Solving Problems**

17. The facilitator should make sure that the target person has the necessary support to participate in problem-solving in light of preferences, strengths, and needs.
18. The facilitator has a key role in guiding the group through the steps of systematic problem solving. The beginning of the process requires focusing on a particular great expectation and specifying what needs to happen for that expectation to be realized.
19. Identify alternative courses of action through dynamic brainstorming. Encourage everyone to freely brainstorm without the feeling that their ideas will be censored or immediately evaluated. One of the key contributions of having diverse membership in the action group is to broaden the range possible options that are identified and considered. Thus, brainstorming should be a highly open and creative process.
20. Identify possible consequences of each action and assess the probability of each consequence occurring. Do a careful analysis of the pros and cons of different options. Consider the specific options that are most likely to be successful in aligning with great expectations.
21. Select the most appropriate options and delineate a specific action plan. This action plan should identify the people who are going to take next steps, the specific actions that they will take, the timeline for accomplishing the steps, how the group can be supportive, and when a progress report should be made to the group. The responsibilities for follow through need to be spread across different group members and can even involve people who are not in the group, as long as group members can help with coordination and communication with those people. A key principle of action groups is that tasks are spread across numerous members so that no one feels overwhelmed. Another key principle is that the "follow through" of the group members occurs between meetings in getting tasks accomplished in order to help great expectations be realized. Thus, people need to leave the meeting with a clear understanding of what they need to do and a commitment to get it done on the timeline that has been specified.

22. Promote systematic problem solving in a way that is participatory, creative, dynamic, and organized. A facilitator will be far more successful in the role if she or he has experienced success in individual and group problem solving in the past. Facilitators need to have a balance between structure and rational problem-solving, on the one hand; and warmth, openness, and flexibility, on the other hand. They need to create synergy within the group with the belief that practically anything is possible by working together collaboratively – a sense that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”
23. Set a comfortable pace and seek to make progress at every meeting and in implementing the action plans between meetings. Support the target person and family to share the good things happening in his or her life because of group efforts. Progress is essential to keep motivation high.
24. As action plans are implemented, monitor progress, identify challenges early on, and make adjustments as necessary. It may be that the level of support being provided to the target person needs to be adjusted.
25. Get everyone involved. Direct specific questions to the individuals who are not having a chance to participate and either directly or indirectly communicate to the people who are dominating the process that others need to have a greater turn.
26. Limit your efforts. Systematic problem solving can only be accomplished on one or two great expectations during a meeting. One mistake that some people make is to try to work on too many things simultaneously. By focusing on one or two goals and developing a systematic specific plan, great progress will be made over time. Thus, the facilitator needs to keep the group directed on what is manageable to accomplish during a given meeting.
27. Summarize. Every meeting should end with a clear summary of the action steps that need to occur before the next meeting.
28. Send out a brief list of action steps and who is responsible for each after each meeting.  
Begin the following meeting by reviewing the list and having each person report on progress.

### **Celebrating**

29. Celebrate progress. Every meeting needs to have opportunities to celebrate progress. The facilitator needs to model and other group members will quickly join in affirming progress, strengths, and positive contributions.
30. Allow and encourage affirmations. It is very important for the target person and family to let group members know how the positive quality of life experiences that are occurring that are resulting from individual and group support.
31. Eat and drink. Special snacks can be added to the meetings as an element of celebration. This might include a birthday cake for some group member, a special menu that consists of

people's favorite foods, or some seasonal remembrance such as valentine candy for everyone.

32. Develop the "joy quotient." Set aside time to "party" rather than to "problem solve." Create opportunities characterized totally by fun and enjoyment. All different kinds of diverse ideas can be considered from having a chance for people to attend together a community recreational event, sing along with a group member who plays a guitar, have different group members put on an impromptu talent show, or have a cook-out in the backyard. The key is that people are having fun together, feeling positive about the great expectations that are getting put into place, and deriving a sense of connection and nurture from each other.
33. Work toward everyone, especially the target person and family, feeling empowered and rejuvenated by their shared GAP experience, as well as more hopeful about a positive future.