

The 10 Habits of Highly Successful Trail Advocates

"If we in the trails community can work out our differences among ourselves, and present a united front to the funders and decision makers, we'll have much more power."

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Organization

When I hear about trails success stories around the country, I like to find out why they succeeded. I've noticed that the groups or individuals who make it happen have certain characteristics in common-- what I call the 10 habits of highly successful trails advocates

- 1. They pick their battles carefully!** -- i.e., they act strategically. They know they can't do it all; they have to prioritize, or they'll spend too much time and effort on the wrong projects.
- 2. They have lots of patience, with themselves and the other folks they're trying to motivate.** For example, they don't demand too much from agency people if they don't know what challenges those agencies are facing.
- 3. On the other hand, they have persistence.** They don't give up easily. They approach problems in new ways.
- 4. They're creative.** They know there's no magic formula, and that no two communities are alike. They must invent new ideas all the time. For example, in Colorado Springs, our success was partly due to the fact that we involved the business community a great deal. But in Boulder, where things are much different, the people organizing a new trails coalition are going to have to be very careful about allying themselves with businesses, because Boulderites don't automatically trust business people.
- 5. They reach out.** We're very fortunate here in the West, and you are all especially fortunate here in Wyoming, because I can tell you, people in the West have a much more cooperative attitude and understanding of different trails uses than folks in the East.

But let's ask ourselves: could we reach out more? Couldn't we be better ambassadors for trails? Who could you talk with to help get trails built in your area? I was once very surprised to be invited to speak before the Women Lawyers of the Pikes Peak Region, which later became an active organizational member of our trails coalition! It would never have occurred to me to ask them to join. But after that, I started talking to all sorts of groups and businesses and community leaders.

Be forewarned, you may get criticized for bringing in someone from "the enemy camp." My response to that: hey, be sure to attend the other groups' meetings -- it's actually the perfect opportunity to research their strategies!

In actuality, though, I've found that familiarity breeds understanding. When I get representatives from various trails user communities to really sit down and talk with each other, they usually (not always, but usually) end up realizing they have more to gain by working together than by battling.

- 6. Successful trails advocates are resourceful.** They're not afraid to be scroungers. If you can talk the local cement company into dumping their daily leftovers onto the end of your new trail, be glad! If you can get the county to use recycled asphalt to build trails, go for it!

7. They think nationally, act locally. No matter how pressing our local situation is, we must pay attention to the national scene. ISTEA has brought us more money for trails than anything we ever did on a local level! The people who work on the national scenes are the ones who made that happen for us.

8. They're like the Boy Scouts: they're prepared. Successful trails advocates somehow find time to get ready for the next challenge. For example, in Colorado Springs, trails advocates ensured early on that the city had a really good Trails Master Plan. Our city trails people educated themselves quickly on ISTEA Enhancements. And we got City Council to declare trails a community priority. Then, when the first round of ISTEA Enhancements funds were available, we were able to move at lightning speed to access that money! The result? Our city raised \$830,000 for trails the first year ISTEA funds were distributed!

9. They're committed. Of course there are exceptions, but in general, X units of work results in X miles of trails

We tend to overlook this; we'd rather find some slick strategies and miracle cures than work long and hard. But the unfortunate fact is, to be successful trails advocates, we have to motivate our volunteers, our board members, our agency reps, our elected officials-- and ourselves!-- to just plain work hard for trails.

10. Successful trails advocates take risks. Don't be afraid to act if you've done a good job of educating yourself about an issue. This isn't rocket science. Trails advocacy is a very common-sense, seat-of-the-pants job.

In conclusion, I believe that if we don't hang together, we'll hang separately. Trails everywhere suffer from a lack of funding and a lack of stewardship. I believe that if we in the trails community can work out our differences among ourselves, and present a united front to the funders and decision makers, we'll have much more power. We'll have a much better chance of raising the funds and getting the legislation we need for all trails.

I hope you agree and that you'll join me in this approach.

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