

Growing Power and Milwaukee Environmentalism

Organization Overview and Three Suggestions for Improvement

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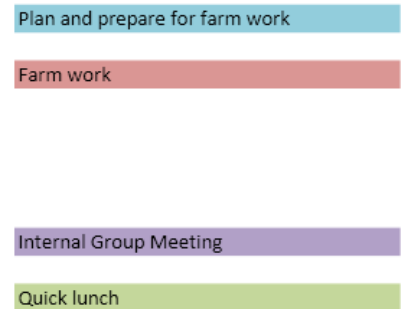


Growing Power is an urban farm and Community Food Center based in Milwaukee, WI. The farm includes several greenhouses, livestock, and an apiary. Growing Power sells fresh, organic produce to community members and hosts workshops and seminars on sustainable farming techniques. Will Allen, Growing Power’s founder and CEO, has brought fame and widespread support to the endeavor. Since it began in 1993, Growing Power has expanded from its headquarters in the Silver Spring neighborhood of Milwaukee to several other farms in the Milwaukee and Chicago areas. Growing Power is currently working on bringing its products to even more communities, most notably through a partnership with Wal-Mart. As Growing Power continues to expand, it will face challenges that the following suggestions aim to address.

Will Allen (front, center) works with a diverse group of volunteers.¹

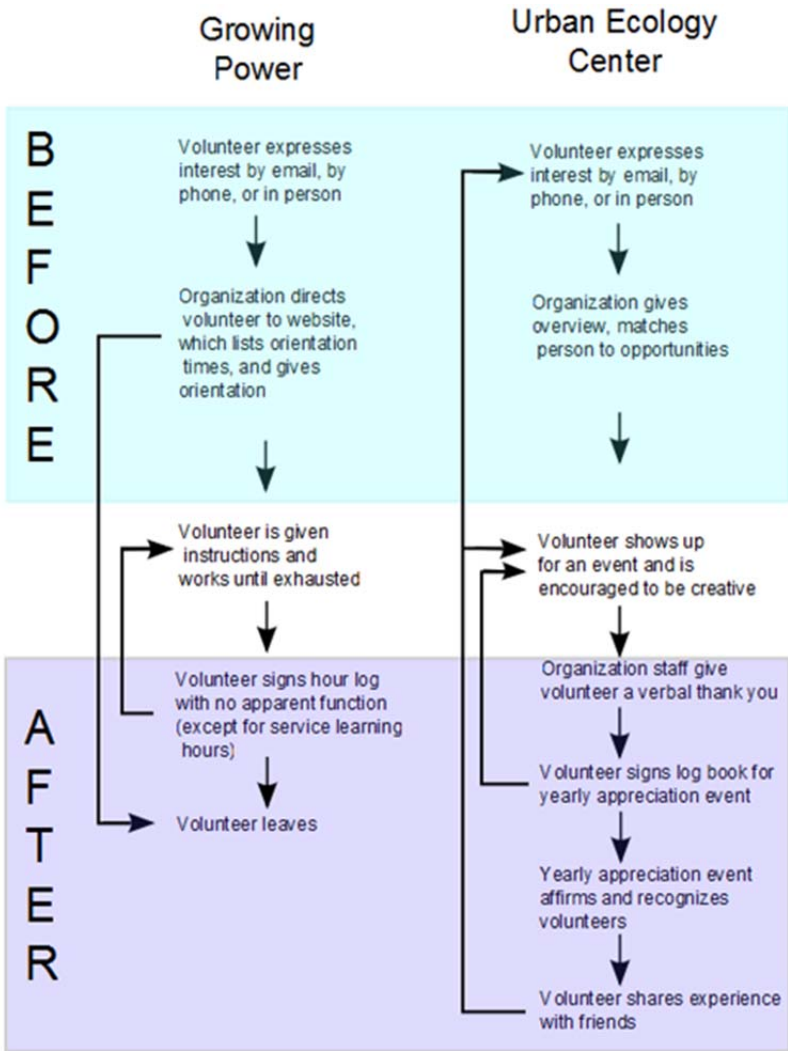
Growing Power's main strength lies in the sense of community among its members. The common goal of using sustainable farming to make a difference in the community drives each employee's sense of commitment. However, one of the main organizational issues for Growing Power is staff burnout. Will Allen, one of the only staff members who has been at Growing Power since its inception, plans to retire in a few years. For Growing Power to effectively survive Allen’s retirement, it needs to help its employees grow as leaders whose jobs evolve with the organization. This can be accomplished by extending lunch into small group meetings where employees can take a break from strenuous work and instead spend time on other issues and projects pertinent to Growing Power’s organizational growth. This would prevent staff burnout by adding less physical and more creative work to their usual farm work.

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The first column portrays a typical day at Growing Power, and the second shows a suggested change to improve communication. At Growing Power, the day is centered around farm work, with a quick or nonexistent lunch break. If lunch were spent each day in different groups of 4-5 people discussing changes Growing Power could make, people would have a break from physical work and get a chance to have their suggestions influence the future of Growing Power.

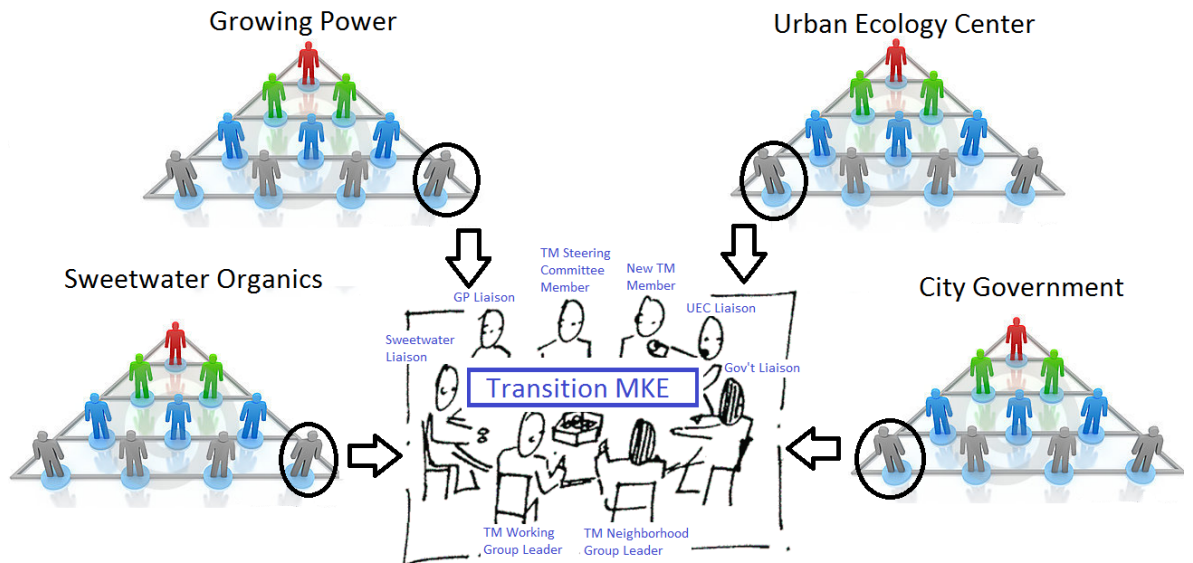
¹ Palmer, Julia. "Growing Solutions." WSU Master Gardener Program of Thurston County. 2 April 2012.



Growing Power’s model for recruiting, training, and supporting volunteers has adapted to its rise in fame as well as the structure of volunteerism in Milwaukee. Because Growing Power sells its produce to local grocery stores, many Milwaukee residents come to the farm to volunteer out of curiosity. Many students at local universities need to complete service-learning hours for environmentally-focused classes, and Growing Power is often suggested as a place to fulfill those hours. Due to a constant influx of volunteers, Growing Power has not addressed the issue of volunteer retention. Most of the volunteer work available is exhausting farm work, so many volunteers leave after the orientation or just a couple hours of work. Although volunteers sign an hour log, there is no follow-up to keep volunteers accountable and enthusiastic. As Growing Power’s influx of new volunteers may decline over time, they will need to adopt a model that matches volunteers to opportunities that suit them best, while retaining volunteers through a mix of informal and formal recognition. The Urban Ecology Center, also based in Milwaukee, has implemented such a model and would be a great resource for improving volunteer retention through follow-up.

Comparison of new volunteer experiences before, during, and after an event for three key environmental organizations in Milwaukee.

Growing Power would benefit from an alliance with Transition Milwaukee, a group that focuses on helping form resilient, sustainable communities within the city. Monthly Transition Milwaukee hub meetings, each with a specific theme, connect local groups together with members of Transition Milwaukee to make change. Growing Power could contribute a formal liaison to these meetings to promote collaboration. A new employee might benefit most from this role.



Transition MKE hub meetings ideally would include formal liaisons from non-profits, businesses, and governmental groups as well as steering committee, working group, and neighborhood group leaders and new members.²

² Graphics courtesy of dreamstime.com and dcpug.wordpress.com.