

How to increase participation

Many people find HDFC governance confusing and even a little intimidating— all the meetings, by- laws, classes, and reports seem new and overwhelming. Officers should be sure to educate new shareholders and continually reengage longtime shareholders. Be sure to explain the benefits of cooperative ownership and how participation is necessary to attain them.

Shareholders may want to participate, but be stopped by factors that discourage their involvement. It is the officers' responsibility to identify these factors and then work to overcome them.

Here's a list of some reasons why people don't participate. Check off any that apply to your building.

- the officers act like they know everything and this intimidates the tenants
- there are no committees to channel tenants' efforts
- tenants don't think they have the necessary skills, lack confidence, or are uncomfortable speaking in public
- tenants don't know where their help is needed
- fear of making mistakes
- language barriers
- meetings are not planned, conducted, or followed- up effectively
- meetings are unpleasant or boring
- a tenant can't take on a large responsibility and does not know it's possible to volunteer only for small tasks
- elderly or disabled tenants don't see where they can be useful
- frustration or dissatisfaction with the HDFC
- child care is unavailable
- nobody ever asked

To increase participation in your association, raise the issue at an officers' meeting and develop a plan to get people involved. The plan should address any factors that you have identified as discouraging people from participating. Talk with the tenants; ask why they are not coming to meetings or joining committees. Start from a place of compassion, not blame for not being involved so far. Officers should start thinking about why they themselves participate— other tenants may get involved for similar reasons.

Review the following list of ideas for increasing participation, select a few items to work on, announce the "participation campaign" at a general meeting and then implement your plan.

Management

- Set up committees with specific duties and make sure that they meet regularly and function effectively
- Learn how to plan, conduct, and follow-up meetings effectively, and encourage frequent voting at meetings
- Regularly delegate tasks to tenants who might be interested
- In larger buildings, have floor captains who are responsible for doing outreach to their floors
- Avoid conflicts of interest or even the appearance of favoritism toward the officers— work to establish trust
- Get training for tenants who need it (UHAB financial classes for a potential bookkeeper, for example). Encourage all tenants to attend UHAB seminars and classes.
- Translate at all meetings if there are people who don't speak English in the building
- Identify tasks, like phone calling or letter writing, that elderly or disabled residents can do

Communication

- Get a bulletin board for association business and keep it well-stocked with information for the tenants
- Slip important flyers/letters under everyone's door
- Make people who participate feel valued and appreciated — explain how important and welcome their involvement is
- Conduct an education campaign to explain what HDFC co-ops are, how they work, and what the benefits are— go door to door, talk to UHAB for more ideas
- Have “one-on-ones” with individual residents to find out why they don't participate; make a plan to include them in whatever capacity possible
- Conduct workshops to teach all tenants basic management skills, like chairing meetings, taking minutes, agendas, financial record-keeping, running committees

- Publish a newsletter
- Present informative and useful reports (especially financial) in meetings
- Explain why participation is essential to successful long-term management
- Pass out a questionnaire asking for input from tenants; discuss their concerns at your meetings

Attractions

- Make sure that meeting agendas reflect tenants' concerns
- Invite interesting or informative outside speakers. You might be surprised who will attend if invited
- Make sure that meetings are fun. Don't make participation boring or depressing
- Provide refreshments at meetings (you can put this in your building's budget. For a more budget-friendly option, hold a potluck before or after meetings.)
- Have a fundraising party, holiday celebration or have an awards dinner each year
- Provide child care in the building during meetings
- Hold a raffle at meetings— tenants must be present to win

Above all, make sure that your HDFC supports tenants who want to participate. Hold regular, well-organized monthly meetings and build effective committees. The best way to encourage active involvement and a fair distribution of the association's workload is to delegate responsibilities during meetings and to rely heavily on committees.

Committees allow you to take advantage of people's interest and channel it into useful activity. In addition to the mandatory maintenance and repairs committee, consider adding an energy efficiency committee; a tenant selection committee; a nominations committee (to identify and train potential new candidates for the board of directors); or a party planning committee.