

YOU DON'T  
HAVE TO DO IT  
ALONE



HOW TO INVOLVE OTHERS  
TO GET THINGS DONE



*Richard H. Axelrod, Emily M. Axelrod, Julie Beedon, and Robert W. Jacobs*

An Excerpt From

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How to Involve Others to Get Things Done***

by Richard H. Axelrod, Emily M. Axelrod, Julie Beedon, and Robert W. Jacobs  
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# INTRODUCTION

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Everyone loves involvement in the abstract. Involving others is a great idea and being involved has universal appeal. No matter how much we love the involvement ideal, when it comes down to involving others or being involved, our fears get in the way.

Involvers worry about whom to include and how to include them. When we are the ones who are asked to participate, we have another set of concerns. We want our voices to be heard and we want our ideas to be accepted. We want to experience the satisfaction that occurs when we pull together to make something happen.

## Fears and Hopes Around Involvement

What do we worry about? We worry about the time it takes to involve others. We worry about the hassle that occurs when we have to incorporate other points of view. We worry about loss of control. And we worry about failure.

Let's take a look at these fears from two perspectives—that of the involver and that of the person asked to be involved.

**It will take too long.** *The involver fears:* Involving others will delay getting things done, causing me to miss important deadlines. *The involved person fears:* If I get involved, it will take a lot of time away from my day-to-day work, leaving me with more work to do.

**It's going to require more effort.** *The involver fears:* It's going to take a lot of work to include others. I will have to bring them up to speed, figure out who needs to be involved, and then work through their differing opinions of what needs to be done. *The involved person fears:* If I get involved, I'm going to have to convince my boss what needs to be done, and I'm not sure he's interested. Besides, while I'm doing that, my own work won't get done. It all seems to be more trouble than it's worth.

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**I will lose control.** *The involver fears:* Bringing people together means that I will not be able to predict the outcome. If I do it myself, I might not have the right answer, but at least it's an answer I can live with. It's just easier to do it myself. *The involved person fears:* If I become involved, it means I'm going to have to consider others' opinions. I don't want to make compromises when I know what needs to be done.

**I will fail.** *The involver fears:* When it's all said and done, I'm the one who is responsible. If we fail, no one will blame them. It will all come back to me. I'm not sure that others feel the same sense of ownership that I do. *The involved person fears:* If I get involved, I'm going to have to live with what we decide. I'm not sure that others care as much as I do. Will we suggest ideas that make things worse instead of better? Will we be worse off in the end?

If these fears ruled the day, involvement would never happen. But opposite these fears reside four hopes. What kind of hopes? The hope that by involving others time will be saved, the work will be made easier, new ideas will emerge, and we will create allies to support our work.

Now let's look at our hopes from both perspectives.

**The work will get done faster.** *The involver hopes:* If I involve others, there will be more people to do the work. I won't have to spend late nights and weekends organizing the garage sale or working on a presentation for my boss. If I involve others, they will be able to take over some of what I do. That will free up my time so that I can do the things that I'm best at doing, where I can make a real contribution. *The involved person hopes:* By getting involved I hope that I will be helpful. I hope that by working with others I will help the job get done sooner. I hope that my contribution will make things go faster.

**The job will be easier.** *The involver hopes:* Instead of doing everything myself there will be others to call on to do the heavy lifting. Knowing that others are there to do the work will help me sleep at night. *The involved person hopes:* I hope that by joining this group the work will go more smoothly. I hope to pull my weight. I want to have fun. I hope that more hands will make light work.

**Better ideas will develop.** *The involver hopes:* If I give up some control, I hope I get better ideas in return. My fondest hope in involving others is that we will come up with new and better ways to do the job—ideas that take a fresh look at old problems, ideas that provide solutions I couldn't see because I've worked on the problem for too long. *The involved person hopes:* By getting involved I hope that I will make a contribution. I hope to help generate fresh ideas so that we come up with some new solutions to old problems.

**There will be other people to support me.** *The involver hopes:* What I want most are allies, people to support my efforts, people to spread the word and encourage others to join. I want to know that there are others besides myself who are willing to work hard toward achieving the goal. When I'm feeling discouraged, having allies gives me the courage to move on. *The involved person hopes:* I hope that by joining this group I will make new allies. I hope that instead of feeling that I have to do everything myself, there will be people to help me along the way.

## Building a Foundation

Dealing successfully with hopes and fears requires a solid foundation.

The Japanese bullet train zooms over 200 miles an hour as it makes its way from Tokyo to Kyoto. But in the United States, similar trains barely reach speeds of 100 miles an hour. What's the difference? The foundation—the tracks they sit on. American railroads are built on tracks that were designed for steam locomotives in the nineteenth century. Japanese lines feature high-tech tracks specifically built to accommodate the ultra-fast bullet train.

Fearing a horrendous accident, we would never think of running the bullet train in the United States at 200 miles an hour. But when the track bed is safe, we don't give these speeds a second thought.

By fully acknowledging our hopes and fears, we create a solid foundation for involving others. When we build our foundation with our fears in mind, we are aware of them, but we don't let our fears prevent us from moving forward. In the same way, while our hopes inspire us to action, we are not Pollyannaish about the task before us.

## The Five Questions

This book is organized around a series of five questions that help us deal with our hopes and fears. When answered, these questions help us build a solid foundation for involving others. These five questions are asked by effective involvers whenever they tackle a new challenge. Answering these questions will allow you to build a safe track bed, one that allows you to move swiftly to your destination. The questions are:

- What kind of involvement is needed?
- How do I know whom to include?
- How do I invite people to become involved?
- How do I keep people involved?
- How do I finish the job?

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We devote a chapter to showing you how to answer each question whenever you take on new work. We also offer a chapter called “Meetings: The Involvement Edge” that provides a blueprint for designing high-involvement meetings. A concluding chapter, “Where to Start,” provides options for where to begin. There are also a reference set of checklists and some ideas for further learning.

What kind of challenges do effective involvers tackle? It could mean solving a problem at work that has been bugging you for months. It could mean saving your company millions of dollars. It could mean launching a community movement to improve your schools or the local health care system. It might even mean drawing on the ideas and energies of thousands of citizens to decide the future of the World Trade Center site in New York City.

Our approach has been tested for the past ten years in organizations such as Boeing, Marriott, and the Cabinet Office of the British Government. These are no-nonsense organizations where time is of the essence, resources like money and talent are precious, and the pressures to perform are enormous. They are also subject to intense scrutiny by many stakeholders, from corporate shareholders and employees to civic groups and ordinary citizens. The plans such organizations develop and the means they use to carry them out *must* be effective; if they are not, the repercussions may be enormous. These organizations have learned that effective involvement is the key to making smart decisions and making them work better. We predict that you will discover this, too.

How do we know these are the right questions? Effective involvers told us so. We asked some of the most productive, creative, and resourceful people we know to walk us through their own techniques for organizing and managing their work. The structure of the book grew out of what they told us. These same effective involvers also read the chapters as they were written and helped us shape the contents to be as useful and practical as possible.

Taken together, the steps in *You Don't Have to Do It Alone* provide you with the tools for creating organizational energy—the kind of energy that can only come when we involve others to get things done. We begin to involve others when we ask ourselves the first question, “What kind of involvement is needed?” Your journey toward successful involvement begins on the next page.



## Chapter

# 1

### WHAT KIND OF INVOLVEMENT IS NEEDED?

**A** few years ago, Jake was faced with a challenging project. A friend had given him his first puppy, a black Labrador retriever. His family already had dogs; his daughter and son each had one. But Theo (named after jazz great Thelonius Monk) was Jake's first, and that made him responsible for everything from feeding and training the puppy to taking him outside in the middle of the night when nature called.

Theo proved to be an active little guy. His idea of fun included activities like chewing on someone's sandal and polishing off a whole chicken left unguarded on a kitchen counter.



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After a few days of this, Jake's wife helped him get clear that more involvement was needed. "You have three choices, honey," she patiently explained. "Theo can clean up his act, or you can find him another home."

"What's the third choice?" Jake wondered.

"You can find a new home. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal."

Jake's work was cut out for him. The kids already considered Theo part of the family—to say nothing about Jake's growing attachment to the pup. But Theo needed to behave better if the Jacobs' happy home was to remain intact.

Jake trying to get the job done alone was not the ticket. Different people with different kinds of involvement were needed. First came the instructor at an obedience class. Next came the kids. Someone had to partner with Theo on his homework when Jake was out of town on business. Theo had to pitch in and do his fair share. He had to learn that sandals were for people's feet, not dogs' mouths, and that his food was in a bowl on the floor, not on a tray on the counter. Even Jake's wife had to reluctantly get involved so the pupil received consistent rewards and corrections.

Jake was confident of success if everyone pulled together. And they did.

Today when Theo and Jake take walks around town, people comment on what a good dog he is. Most days Theo visits Jake's office, where he's become a company mascot. It's even been more than a year since he ate the chicken that was left unattended in the kitchen one day!

By involving others, Jake achieved both of his goals: a four-legged friend for life and a reasonably contented wife.

## Is Doing It Alone Your Best Answer?

In Jake's situation, it was clear he needed to involve others. But it's not often such a clear-cut decision. Involving other people takes time. There's an inherent "hassle factor" when you get more cooks in the kitchen. How will it impact the quality of the work you do? Are you going to have to make too many concessions to keep people satisfied that their voices are being heard? Is your invitation for others to get involved the first step down a slippery slope where every decision becomes a never-ending debate? Your track record of including others may have left a bad taste in your mouth.

Given these possible headaches, it's important to decide whether it makes sense to involve others before getting clear on what kind of involvement you might need. We recommend you start with a tool we call the *Return on Involvement Assessment Tool*. It can help you decide from the get-go whether to involve other people in what you're up to.

ROI is business shorthand for *return on investment*. It's a standard way of assessing the potential value of a financial transaction. The ROI calculation answers the question, "Is this work worthwhile from a financial perspective?" Initiatives with higher returns on investment are allocated time, money, and other resources. Initiatives with lower ROIs get put on hold or are scrapped.

This traditional definition of ROI doesn't deal with the additional question, "Does it make sense to involve others in this work?" To answer that question, effective involvers supplement the traditional return on investment analysis with a *return on involvement* analysis. This second type of ROI focuses on whether an involvement-based approach makes sense for what you need to get done. A high return on involvement means you'll see a big payoff in quality, commitment, and productivity from engaging others. A lower return on involvement means you may do the work better alone or with only a few others.

You can see the Return on Involvement Assessment Tool in Figure 1.1.

FIGURE 1.1



## THE RETURN ON INVOLVEMENT ASSESSMENT TOOL

### *Your Own Capability*

- Could you complete the work on your own? Would tackling it alone compromise the quality of your work?

### *How Others Would Feel About Joining You*

- Are others likely to see the work as a good investment of their time and energy? Will they be excited to join this effort? Would they feel left out or even resentful if you did not include them?

### *How Others Could Add Value to Your Efforts*

- What benefits could result from involving others in this work?

### *What It Will Take to Involve Others*

- How difficult will it be to get others involved in this work? How much time and energy will be needed to keep them involved?

(continued)

*Overall Assessment*

- How would the benefits from involving others compare to the costs needed to involve them?
  
- Based on your answers to these questions, does it make sense to involve others?

An engineering manager we know road-tested the Return on Involvement Assessment Tool. He used it in approaching a project to reduce the cycle time it took to make revisions to engineering drawings. Let's follow his line of thinking through his answers to the tool's questions in Figure 1.2.

FIGURE 1.2



### THE RETURN ON INVOLVEMENT ASSESSMENT TOOL EXAMPLE

#### *Reducing the Cycle Time to Make Revisions to Engineering Drawings*

##### *Your Own Capability*

- Could you complete the work on your own? Would tackling it alone compromise the quality of your work?
  - *Engineering Manager Response: I could complete this project on my own with confidence because I have intimate knowledge of where breakdowns occur and how to fix them.*

(continued)

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### *How Others Would Feel About Joining You*

- Are others likely to see the work as a good investment of their time and energy? Will they be excited to join this effort? Would they feel left out or even resentful if you did not include them?
  - *Engineering Manager Response: This is a high priority project for the entire engineering organization and for our internal customers, the production organization. A lot of people have a big stake in getting these revisions done faster and would like to help make it happen.*

### *How Others Could Add Value to Your Efforts*

- What benefits could result from involving others in this work?
  - *Engineering Manager Response: I could get this project done on my own, but it would be better to involve others. Together we would probably find more ways to get these revisions done faster. From past experience, I'm sure it will be easier to get these changes implemented if I let more people get involved.*

### *What It Will Take to Involve Others*

- How difficult will it be to get others involved in this work? How much time and energy will be needed to keep them involved?
  - *Engineering Manager Response: Since this is such a critical project, I don't think I will have much trouble getting other people signed up to work on it. I think if we thought it through on the front end, we could develop a plan that would make it pretty easy to keep them involved to see the job through.*

### *Overall Assessment*

- How would the benefits from involving others compare to the costs needed to involve them?
    - *Engineering Manager Response: By involving people from the very beginning, I won't have to spend time convincing them of solutions that I developed. I will also have the benefit of their ideas and as a result the solution will be better.*
  - Based on your answers to these questions, does it make sense to involve others?
    - *Engineering Manager Response: Absolutely.*
-

Now it's your turn. Think of some project or initiative where you might be wondering about whether it makes sense to involve others. Then use the Return on Involvement Assessment Tool to get clearer about whether you should involve others or not.

## What Kind of Involvement Do You Need?

If you have decided it makes sense to involve others, you now need to determine the kind of involvement that will be best for your particular situation.

Whether you're acting as a manager at work or welcoming a new puppy into your home, it's important not to be tempted to skip this question. Early on you may feel pulled toward immediate action. Maybe you've got a big assignment that's due soon. Pausing to get clear before you start working may seem like a waste of valuable time. Or maybe you're thinking that this question is overkill for you: "What we're doing is simple. Heck, we could be done in the time it'll take to determine the kind of involvement I need."

These are common feelings. But if you're serious about being an effective involver, it's important to rethink these assumptions. Rather than plunging headfirst into your work, take a "Go slow to go fast" approach. When you invest the time to get clear about the kind of involvement you need, you make it easier for people to join you. You'll be able to easily explain the type of help you need and why you need them to pitch in. People are drawn to clarity. Answer this question well and people will want to work with you.

It may be easiest for you to do this up-front thinking alone, or you may want to ask for help from a few others. Either way, your most important objective is to be able to explain clearly and succinctly the kind of involvement you need and why you've decided on this type.

Consider who, if anyone, can help you get clear. If you want to assemble a core group and haven't yet, do so now. There's no rule about how many people is the right number. Invite enough people to ensure that your initial thinking is solid, but not so many that you get bogged down before you even get started. Don't choose folks with whom you tend to always agree. Reach out to a critical friend. If you pay attention to the big picture, recruit someone who focuses on details. If you're the logical type, find someone who picks up on other people's emotions.

## **Why Determines How**

When you get clear on the reasons you need to involve others in your work, you'll become clear on the kind of involvement you'll need to get the job done.

Here are four basic reasons for reaching out to engage others:

- You need others' specific expertise or "Know-How Involvement"—there are skills and knowledge required that you don't have.
- You need others' help with basic to do's or "Arms and Legs Involvement"—the job is too big for you to get done on your own.
- You need others' buy-in or "Care and Commitment Involvement"—without their long-term commitment you'll never be successful.
- You need others to become more capable in the future or "Teaching and Learning Involvement"—this enables others to take on more responsibilities and frees you to make other contributions.

These different kinds of involvement are not mutually exclusive. In most cases, you'll need to tap into more than one type of involvement to be successful. Let's take a look at the story of Jake and his new puppy that opened this chapter.

Jake needed the Know-How Involvement of the obedience class instructor to tame Theo's rambunctious behavior. He needed the Arms and Legs Involvement of his kids to pitch in with Theo's training when he was out of town. His wife's Care and Commitment Involvement was a critical success factor, because if she didn't buy in to the whole idea of another dog, Theo would never have made it in the front door. And during those hours spent in the yard calling out "Heel, Theo, heel!" Jake needed Teaching and Learning Involvement from the pup so that he didn't face the prospect of losing his voice every time he walked the dog.

Our engineer focused on a different combination of types of involvement in reducing the cycle time it took to make revisions to engineering drawings. He believed he had the knowledge and experience to complete the redesign work on his own, but doing so could have left others confused about why he was making certain changes. They could have objected to his plans. This told him he needed to reach out and create some Care and Commitment Involvement.

By completing his return on involvement analysis, he realized that without involving others, he could also be missing an opportunity to come up with the best solution to his problem. Though he thought he

knew enough to solve the problem on his own, it was clear to him that others had experiences and perspectives he did not. So there was also a component of Know-How Involvement he needed to consider as he went about his work.

Let's take a closer look at each of these four kinds of involvement and how you'll know which is your best bet in different situations.

***Know-How Involvement.*** You use Know-How Involvement to tap into skills, knowledge, or experience that is needed to move your work forward but that you don't possess. Telltale signs that this is the kind of involvement you need include situations where you:

- Realize you lack formal schooling for the work at hand. This is the case, for example, when you could benefit from having a finance expert on a project team at work, a marketing expert for a new program at your local school, or an engineer to help assess the renovations needed at your church.
- Are clear about your current circumstances and where you want to be in the future, but don't see a roadmap for getting from "here" to "there." Architects, interior designers, and general contractors can all help you bring the image of your dream home into focus and lay out the steps to follow in building it. A manager may know specifications for features and pricing of a new product, but she needs members of her development team to chart a course that creates the actual product.
- Might have *some* expertise in a particular area, but where others have more and could do the job better, faster, or cheaper. Yes, you might eventually get that new disposal installed in the kitchen, but a professional plumber could have it done this afternoon, putting you in a much better mood for going out on the town later that night. At work, you might have come up through the ranks as an engineer and still be less than an expert when it comes to the latest software. This is a time to make use of Know-How Involvement.

***Arms and Legs Involvement.*** You use Arms and Legs Involvement to check off to do's when the list is too long for you to tackle on your own. You've got the know-how, but the scope of work exceeds your time and energy or you'd be better off applying your expertise in other ways. Here are some situations that set off warning bells that it's time to reach out for this kind of involvement:



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- The work is simple and repetitive—easily done by another. When it's time to move to a new home, close friends sometimes pitch in to help you pack. You might even hire parts of the job out to professional movers. Retail businesses are famous for an “all hands on deck” approach to sales days when people come flocking in and the standard shift assignments alone would lead to long lines and disgruntled customers.
- The amount of work is more than you can handle on your own. Have you ever signed on to organize the Christmas tree sales or car washing fundraisers for your child's scout or youth group? Imagine the hours you'd have spent freezing or soaked if other parents had not contributed their fair share. If you've ever had a hand in setting up for a large meeting or trade show at work, you know firsthand the benefits of Arms and Legs Involvement.
- Your time could be better spent doing other things. Hiring out your lawn care, house cleaning, or even the babysitter on Saturday night are all examples of this kind of involvement. Public transportation such as buses and trains are another example of this type of involvement. They make it possible to finish a final edit on a paper or catch a catnap on the way to and from work.

**Care and Commitment Involvement.** You use Care and Commitment Involvement to create buy-in from others to the work you need to do. This type of involvement is called for when:

- The work you are doing involves change. Without others' caring and commitment, you'll never implement your best-laid plans. At a personal level, marriage is a great example requiring this kind of involvement. It can represent the single greatest change in your life. Without deep caring and commitment, couples never stand a chance of adapting to the many changes that go hand-in-hand with those vows. When you think about getting people on board with new strategies or ways of working in organizations, Caring and Commitment Involvement is what you're after.
- You need people to stay involved over an extended period of time. If you agree to take tickets at the door for your church's annual fundraiser, that's Arms and Legs Involvement. But if you've chaired the planning subcommittee for the six months leading up to the gala event, you're clearly in Care and Commitment Involvement territory. The best teams you've been part of have featured this type of involvement. You were in it together over the long haul to accomplish shared goals.

- The work before you will be difficult or you're not certain of success. This is when people's extra effort can make the difference between success and failure. Families need this level of extraordinary involvement when a child is failing school or an elderly parent needs to move in with adult children. In both cases, the path ahead will be challenging and you'll have an easier time navigating these uncharted waters with a healthy dose of Care and Commitment Involvement. Turning around a company that's in danger of going out of business or being acquired is an example of the same dynamic in a business setting.

**Teaching and Learning Involvement.** You use Teaching and Learning Involvement to build others' skills and knowledge so they become more capable of doing their work in the future. Situations where this type of involvement is needed include:

- When others want to grow and develop and seek you out as a mentor (or vice versa). This is one of the highest compliments you can be paid—others value what you're doing and how you're doing it so much that they're asking you to be their personal coach. An informal cup of coffee once a month with the immediate past president of the community board you're now heading up is an example of this. You may have hit it off with a boss early in your career whom you still stay in touch with and whose advice you value.
- When an organization makes a conscious effort to develop people in it. This is where formal programs come into play. Your church, temple, or mosque likely has scripture classes or study groups available so congregation members can learn more about their religion and live in line with its teachings. You may also have a development plan with a career ladder at your workplace. The company's course offerings are all part of a planned effort for you to develop and become a more valuable contributor.
- When you know there is other important work for you to do, if only there were someone who could do what you're now doing. It's a great gift when you're headed out of town for a well-deserved vacation if your kids know how to cook dinner for themselves.

Think of the time that you'll have available for packing before you leave instead of slaving away in the kitchen preparing a week's worth of dinners. When some in your company learn how to take the lead in keeping the daily operations humming, it creates valuable time for you and others to begin planning for the future.

Getting clear on the kind of involvement you need by using the tools we've provided will generate your excitement and energy around the work ahead. Furthermore, it's a different kind of energy than if you'd started with an immediate rush into activity. Rather than feeling under the gun—"The clock is ticking!"—you'll feel grounded and quietly confident about your ability to engage others. You can never guarantee smooth sailing for all your work. But rough seas can be minimized if you get clear on the kind of involvement you need before you get started.

## Different Kinds of Involvement: A Case Study

It's important to always stay clear about what you are trying to accomplish since different goals call for different kinds of involvement. Here's a story that illustrates the point.

A Jewish temple and an Episcopal church share a building in Ann Arbor, Michigan—the longest-standing affiliation of its type in America. Some years ago, the temple and church were in conflict, which threatened the harmony of the relationship. The membership of the temple was growing, but that of the church was not. Members of the temple wanted a larger social hall for celebrating life-cycle events in their community—weddings, bar and bat mitzvahs, and so on. The church wanted to invest its excess funds in charitable works. Initially the boards of each organization met together to see if they could iron out their differences.

After these sessions, the temple leaders thought that the project was clear: the work they faced was to decide whether or not to build an expanded social hall. They planned to hold a few meetings with the board's audit committee to determine the financial feasibility of such an effort (Know-How Involvement). They talked about what it would take to encourage members of the congregation to contribute to a fundraising campaign (a creative variation of Arms and Legs Involvement you might call "Checkbook and Wallet Involvement"). But as they explored the situation further, they uncovered a more fundamental question: "What kind of temple do we want to be?"

Suddenly, the entire project changed. The temple leadership knew they needed to engage the entire congregation in such a significant question. Through a series of congregation-wide meetings, temple members joined together in conversations about their collective future (Care and Commitment Involvement). A vision for the temple community gradually emerged. At the same time, they also got clearer about the nature of their relationship with their church partners. This new clarity made it relatively easy to resolve the building issues. They proceeded to build a beautiful new worship area, social hall, and educational classrooms that have benefited both congregations—with strong backing from across the congregations' members.

Today, the space shared by the temple and the church is the best-utilized building in Ann Arbor. Schools, community groups, fitness classes, and lifetime learning programs are all housed there for below-market fees. This met the church's need for charitable works. These various groups have also provided a substantial source of income, defraying the costs borne by the temple and church for the construction project. The lesson: as you get clearer about what you're trying to accomplish, you'll get clearer about the kinds of involvement you need.

## Chapter Checklist

The sequence for getting clear on the kind of involvement you need is:

- Use the Return on Involvement Assessment Tool to think through the risks and rewards of involving others in your work or going it alone.
- Based on this analysis, determine if it makes sense to tackle the work in front of you without involving anyone else. If it does, go to it and get the job done.
- If you've gotten clear that you want to include others in your efforts, decide what kind of involvement will be most useful in your particular circumstances:
  - Know-How Involvement
  - Arms and Legs Involvement
  - Caring and Commitment Involvement
  - Teaching and Learning Involvement

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