

YOU AND YOUR ORGANIZATION

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We all want an organization that is alive and young in spirit if not in years. Yet many of our groups get into a rut. How can we develop and keep our organization alive?

Many organized groups go through different stages in their development. Let's look at seven stages some groups go through.

Stage 1 - The birth of an idea.

An enthusiastic, natural leader becomes aware of some problem or need and decides that something should be done about it.

Stage 2 - Sharing the idea.

The idea person shares his/her idea with some friends and develops a core of concerned individuals who agree that a problem or need exists and that they should get together to do something about it. They tend to be enthusiastic, idealistic, and perhaps not very realistic in their planning. Major goals are decided and the vision of the organization begins to come into focus.

The core group begins to talk up the idea with other friends and plans the first meeting.

Think about your group. How did it begin? Who helped found your group? What goals did they set in the beginning?

Stage 3 - Let's get to work.

The first meeting is held. A simple organization is formed. Officers are elected. Enthusiasm abounds. As the group begins working to accomplish its broad objectives, narrower goals come into view. Certain goals and methods seem to work and others do not.

On the basis of this limited experience, the organization develops its own image of what it stands for and how it will work to accomplish its objectives. In this stage the major characteristic is the free testing of alternatives, so long as they do not obviously contradict the broad objectives. Because of the lack of experience, the organization may fall into a mold that can later prove undesirable. The "personality" of the organization is determined in this stage.

Stage 4 - Committees emerge.

By this time, members believe they know what they can accomplish and how to go about it. The testing of alternatives is no longer an important aspect of the organization's work.

With the emphasis on particular problem areas and particular methods of working, members are grouped into specialized segments, often called committees. Membership continues to rise. Vigor is pronounced and the dedication to the common goal is still evident. Activity increases.

In this stage, the organization may decide that it needs a new kind of leader--perhaps someone who is more in harmony with the characteristics of the developing membership than with the original core group.

Stage 5 - "But let's be practical."

The major concern begins to shift from the idealistic original goals, and the group feels that it is becoming more "practical" in its outlook and methods. Members who were easy to get have already joined. Now it is work to secure new ones.

The organization begins to become more aware of competing demands on members of other groups, family responsibilities, etc. There is concern that the organization may become "unwieldy."

The urge to look for newer members begins to flag. The routine of the operation begins to occupy more of the thinking of the membership, and the real purpose becomes less important.

Officers find they must spend more time coordinating subgroups because of the natural tendency for each of us to go our own way, somewhat in disregard of the main purpose. Efficiency increases, but enthusiasm wanes, as the organization practices its established routines.

Stage 6 - Don't rock the boat!

The organization has reached a mature or steady state by this time, and there is no desire to change things in any significant way. New ideas are viewed with suspicion.

Little change in program occurs. Membership growth is essentially complete. Continuing to do what we have always done is a major factor in all operations.

The organization now has community acceptance and prestige, and it knows where it fits in the power hierarchy of the community. Its officers are respected. There may be a desire to elect the “right” officers that will maintain, uphold, or raise the status of the organization.

Rituals, procedures, regulations, and symbolic aspects of the organization assume major importance.

If the environment does not change markedly, this mature organization is the most efficient instrument for accomplishing the original objectives. If, however, the needs and times change, the organization becomes ineffective, because it has lost its ability to adjust. It is simply not free to consider alternatives due to the weight of the precedent. This is a mature group -- it is predictable and dependable. Usually . . .

Stage 7- Senility.

The vision is gone! The purpose of the organization is forgotten, and habit reigns supreme. The membership becomes a clique. New members are not sought.

There is a reverence for “the good old days. ” There is more concern about a glorious history than about unmet needs of the present and future. No purpose is evident outside of the perpetuation of the organization itself. Leadership is old in spirit, if not in years.

Function follows form. Subgroups may emerge, but they are of little consequence ordinarily, since the things they want to consider must conform to the outmoded structure.

Look at Your Organization

At what stage of development is your organization now? Are you happy with where you are? If not, perhaps you need to look at ways to change the group’s perspective.

There are three options for your group. It can stay the same, but the people involved may keep changing. It can go through a period of decline, losing members and limiting its program. Or it can change and grow.

Is your group perfect just the way it is? You know what you want to do and how you want to do it. How can you keep the enthusiasm and vitality? How can you make the changes being implemented work for you?

Even if everything is working well, you should stop from time to time to evaluate the group. Every few years think about your mission and your future. Ask yourself: Why

are we doing this? Why are we not doing something else? This provides a way to test current ideas and gives you the opportunity to end any programs that are no longer of interest to members.

You can make some changes. Among some of the things you can do are:

- * Take inventory of what you have now. Who is involved and why? What do members get out of belonging to this group? How could other people get the same satisfaction out of belonging?
- * Pinpoint the problems and then find the solutions. What matters is how you use the knowledge you gain from this. Discuss the problem with members, community leaders, or advisers. Emphasize that the purpose of looking at problems is to find ways to make the organization better.
- * If you are losing members, try to find out why? Can you resolve the problems?

As more appropriate functions are found, the group may find new life to keep it going while serving the community. Remember in stage 3, it was noted that a young organization tests alternatives freely. But by stage 6, new ideas are viewed with suspicion. If the needs of the times change, the organization may become ineffective, because it has lost the ability to consider and adapt new alternatives.

The times do change. Is the group developing new goals? New methods? New ways of reaching potential members? Even before you are forced to change, try some new programs to prevent hardening of the arteries.

Getting Involved

Listed below are some things **you** can do to put new life into your group:

- Attend meetings regularly.
- Keep in mind the purpose of the group.
- Live up to the responsibilities of membership.
- Show a personal interest.
- Think for yourself.
- Develop your ability to communicate.
- Promote a spirit of teamwork.
- Do your homework for each meeting.
- Be a peacemaker.
- Keep your sense of humor and use it.
- Give credit where credit is due.
- Give your officers and leaders respect and cooperation.
- Encourage, do not discourage.
- Keep expenses under control.
- Persevere amidst shortcomings and difficulties.