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Share Your Chapter's Success Story – or Other “Words of Wisdom”!

How NOT to Attract Chapter Members, Event Participants, and Volunteers in a “Chronologically Challenged” Society

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The chapter activities session at World Future 2005 has inspired an idea! WFS chapters can benefit from a continuing dialog that shares their success stories, winning ideas, and other experiences with one another. With the presidents and former presidents of six other WFS chapters – success stories in their own right – now represented on the **FUTUREtakes** Editorial Board, I can think of no better place to launch this dialog. To start the process, please allow me to share some of my own thoughts and observations that I have gained from various organizations through the years.

A major challenge faced by many professional societies and other organizations is to become enough of a priority in people's lives to attract event participants, chapter members, and the volunteer labor force on which professional societies depend. This is especially true in my part of the world, which can be characterized as a “chronologically challenged” – or “not enough hours in the day” – society, and where (at least in major metropolitan centers such as Washington DC) numerous activities are available to compete for the limited free time that one does have. (To get a glimpse of life in other parts of the world, I am dependent on our Editors, authors – and yes, you, our readers – who live there. In this, you are my teachers, and I cannot possibly ask for better ones.) Indeed, in Washington DC, one recent estimate places the number of *daily* activities that are open to the general public at approximately 500!

So, the challenge becomes one of “hearts and minds,” to borrow an increasingly trite phrase from another context. How does the chapter leadership win over enough hearts and minds to attract enough participants, members, and volunteers to make the chapter and its activities viable, and to provide the “critical mass” necessary to do this in a self-sustaining way? Although this question has several answers, I have buried one such answer in the question itself – specifically, in the phrase “chapter leadership.” (Hint: You will notice that I did not use terms such as “chapter management” or “chapter governing body.”)

During my years of involvement in other organizations, I have found that leadership is a good place to start. While many definitions of “leadership” abound, some from people far more knowledgeable than I on the subject, my own experiences have taught me that vision and inspiration are two key elements of leadership. That is, there needs to be a vision of a better tomorrow for the organization,

accompanied by inspiration for people to invest the time and effort to manifest that better tomorrow. In the most effective organizations that I have observed, the leaders have devoutly practiced the “hearts and minds religion” (for lack of a better term), a “religion” characterized by words such as “vision” (not necessarily “vision statement”), “inspiration,” “possibility thinking” (and follow-through!), “empowerment,” and “being all that we (the organization) can be.”

But I’ve also seen organizations practice “that other religion” that has a vocabulary of its own, one that is very different – for example, “process,” “procedure,” “policy,” “protocol” (the “four P’s”), “oversight,” “org chart,” “by-laws,” etc. – hardly the things that attract builders, creators, and men and women of vision. Even as far back as my college days, I’ve seen organizations asphyxiate themselves on administration for the sake of administration. Indeed, the 4 P’s and various administrative functions have their places, but they are not enough. As two top leadership and management consultants, Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, admonish us in *Leaders*, “Managers do things right. Leaders do the right things.” When administrative functions become ends in themselves and/or dominate the time, effort, and focus of the “leadership” – that is, when “the tail wags the dog” – then the organization lacks “la chispa de la vida.” Perhaps you have observed, as I have, that “dead,” stodgy organizations are not the ones that inspire affiliation and event participation. They are even less successful at attracting volunteer service.

The biological sciences provide us a rough but nonetheless insightful analogy. A human being can “live” if his/her autonomic nervous system is functioning, but without the command function of the spinal nervous system (analogous to leadership for our purposes), one is little more than a “vegetable” or perhaps comatose.

So, next time your chapter’s governing body or committees convene, what will you find? Do you see vision, inspiration, self-motivation, imagination, out-of-the-box thinking (and follow-through) – and a commitment to greatness? Or do the participants bring with them the baggage of assumptions that they themselves do not see – for example, “this is how you run an organization,” “this is what you do at a business meeting,” or “these are the officers and committees that you have”? If you are a chapter officer, are you really leading the organization to new levels of being and of achievement, or are you merely doing what another officer did before you and what yet someone else will do after you? As a way forward, is there any reason not to substitute imagination (with follow-through) for “business as usual” – since after all, we are futurists?

At the chapter activities session, you heard from the US National Capital Chapter. During the past few minutes, you have heard from me personally. But don’t let me be the proverbial last word on the subject. Your chapter and its leaders have its own story to tell. Send your success story, or any other “words of wisdom,” to futuretakes@cs.com.

*The author is Editor-in-Chief of **FUTUREtakes**. The ideas delineated in this article are based on the author’s own views and observations, and they do not necessarily represent the official position of the US National Capital Chapter of the World Future Society.*