

Getting Started: The Founding of Membership-Based Organizations

Overview

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century large numbers of membership-based organizations emerged to promote and protect their members. These organizations were launched in response to threats and challenges in the society the founders believed would jeopardized their ability to achieve their professional goals among these were the trust and confidence of the general public. This study examined the histories of several of these organizations. It investigated the problems the founders encountered as they began to develop the strategies and tactics needed for the organization to survive and prosper.

Findings

The study revealed several key findings:

MBOs start small and grow but maintain their homogeneity; For-profit organizations start small and grow but must diversify their expertise in order to survive.

Many of these organizations begin with fewer than twenty-five very dedicated members who share a common set of interests and values that give the organization a certain degree of homogeneity. It can not be determined if the size was the critical variable that led to their establishment, growth and eventual success. It may also be that founders tap first into their existing network of people because relationships are already established. And those networks are not generally too broad in nature. Further study of newly formed groups might produce answers to these questions along with many more regarding the size of these groups at their founding.

Members have always been busy, but that does not stop them from becoming involved.

The members take on all the necessary tasks to get the association operating effectively. One might assume that members in the 19th and early 20th centuries had more time to devote to these efforts. Their histories clearly note, however, that the demand on members' time for a wide range of responsibilities existed even then. This finding then suggests that members will become involved if they feel their efforts are well-spent, no matter what demands exist in their lives. This is another factor in which further study could lead to new paradigms in volunteerism for membership-based organizations.

The introduction of staff initially poses no great threat; until a critical number is reached.

The very success of the efforts on the volunteer members increases the size and responsibilities that lead to hiring a small staff. One wonders if members understood the impact of their success. Growth would introduce a new

range of challenges, including the addition of a paid professional who could provide, at first, administrative support and, subsequently, programmatic support. This is a critical stage in the organization's growth. At first, many organizations selected a candidate from their own membership - possibly someone they knew and felt they could trust. Many remained for an extended period of time contributing to the organization's further growth. Even greater success requires of more professional staff. As the organization continues to grow and become more complex, it eventually requires a professional who possesses association management expertise. This shift, while necessary, initiates the potential of creating a separate staff culture.

Professional staff are limited in the contribution they can make.

The professional staff can never replace the role of the members as content experts, or as volunteers and leaders. Members hold a perspective about their trade, profession and personal interest that professional staff can never fully understand. Even members who transition to staff positions lose the full awareness of the impact of an issue, trend or challenge to the profession, trade or interest. Members will always play a crucial role in the organization if its mission is to advance a specific discipline. The histories suggest that organizations have always depended on members to assume selected roles. And, that they have always had difficulty getting enough members to volunteer or getting them to fulfill the expected role. These problems, we posit, are more a factor of how the organization effectively orients and manages its volunteers rather than any form of apathy among the membership. Again, this is a critical area for further study. Findings may allow membership-based organizations to recognize the importance of their culture, environment and organizational infrastructure.

What Can Be Learned?

Considerations for Application

Membership-based organizations pass through several stages on their way to becoming well-established. Some may never get beyond the initial stage of operating with only volunteers. It is not clear how many organizations remain at that level as they only recently have had to report their existence. The shift from an all-volunteer organization to one with a paid staff requires some careful planning. Those who launch these organizations take a great pride in them and maybe reluctant to let go of certain activities that should be delegated to the growing staff. How this transition takes place has significance for the continued success of these organizations that need volunteers to perform critical functions.

The full paper describing this dynamic in more detail can be retrieved by clicking on the following: **Getting Started: The Founding of Membership-based Organizations.**

Contact Melos for more information about the emergence and development of membership-based organizations.

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