**Building a Leadership Pipeline**, Sarah Garrity, Component Relations Specialist, Billhighway

Have you ever looked into the eyes of a chapter president who’s supposed to be outgoing, but realized they’re not going anywhere because there’s no one to take their place? You can see the frustration and resignation in their eyes. Chapters wouldn’t have to put their leaders through this torture if they had a chapter leadership pipeline in place.

You can’t just expect new chapter leaders to emerge miraculously year after year—although sometimes they do. Chapters need a method to identify and prepare members for leadership positions so they don’t over-work and recycle the few qualified leaders they’ve got. Because when those leaders have had enough, you’ll end up with mediocre leaders or no leaders at all.

**BUILD A BIGGER CHAPTER VOLUNTEER POOL**.

A chapter leadership pipeline pulls members up from a pool of volunteers and places them into leadership positions—chapter officers, directors, and committee chairs and members. But before you build the leadership pipeline, you first must fill up your pool of volunteers.

Our last post explained how to attract and recruit chapter volunteers. We identified eight valid reasons that members have for not volunteering and provided solutions to get around each of those excuses.

For example, dedicate a page on the chapter website to describing volunteer opportunities of all kinds. Highlight upcoming micro-volunteering opportunities in newsletters, on social platforms, and on the website. Describe any open leadership positions, including task forces, advisory groups, special interest groups, and committees.

Members are less likely to commit to something if they don’t really know what they’re in for. Make leadership and volunteering more transparent and accessible to all members, especially those who are not “in the loop.”

Include testimonials from volunteers and chapter leaders about their experience and the impact it had on their lives.

Explain how the chapter is governed: how decisions are made, how leaders get appointed, how long they serve, and where to start if you want to climb the leadership ladder.

The leadership ladder is often a holdover from a different time. Make sure it still serves a purpose. How many years does it take to ascend the ladder? How many members are willing to spend that much time on the ladder?

The ladder must be flexible enough to welcome a diverse group of qualified members. Members should be able to step on and off the ladder when necessary. A chapter leadership pipeline will ensure you always have people on the bench who can step onto the ladder.

**RETHINK AND REDEFINE CHAPTER LEADERSHIP POSITIONS**.

If you have trouble finding and keeping volunteer leaders, it may have something to do with the leadership job. Time is now our most valuable asset because there’s so much more to do with our time. Today’s members aren’t always as willing (or able) to dedicate as much time to their association as they were in the past.

Do your leadership positions demand too much of a member’s time? If that’s the case, you’ll end up with the martyr or superhero chapter leaders we talked about in our last post. You want leaders—members who will delegate tasks and share opportunities to contribute with others—not doers.

* Talk to current and past leaders about responsibilities that could be shared or delegated to other positions.
* Find out what type of support would have made their leadership job easier.
* Could they have benefited from any particular training or assistance?

Perhaps you’ll see the need for new leadership positions or the creation of an entirely new group of volunteers who agree to be on call to temporarily assist leaders.

* Make sure each chapter leadership position has an updated, complete position description.
* Define responsibilities and set expectations, including the time commitment.
* Describe the skills or experience required.
* Don’t forget to include the benefits of volunteering for that position.

Review position descriptions annually. The skills that served your leadership well in the past may not be the same set of skills required for the future.

**CREATE A CHAPTER LEADERSHIP PIPELINE**.

Building a chapter leadership pipeline is a proactive initiative. Chapter leaders past and present must constantly search for and develop their immediate and future successors.

**DISCOVER HIDDEN LEADERS**.

During the new member onboarding and member renewal process, find out if members are or have been leaders for other organizations, for example, HOAs, charities, youth groups, church, sports, or other community groups. Someone whose schedule is heavily committed to another organization may not have time for yours right now, but keep their name on a list for the future.

Talk to existing and past board and committee members about members they would recommend for leadership or committee positions.

Find out who’s highly trusted in the member community by polling members to find out whom they respect.

* Whom do they go to for advice?
* Whose opinion do they value?
* Whom would they trust with the leadership of their chapter?

This “member intel” is helpful to staff at National who may find themselves in the position of helping chapters recruit new leaders.

When you approach members on this list about taking on a leadership role, emphasize the endorsements they received from their peers. Because it’s human nature to want to live up to the expectations of our peers, they may be more easily persuaded to help out.

**SEND OUT CHAPTER LEADERSHIP SCOUTS**.

College and professional sports teams have their scouts, your leadership teams need their scouts too. The leadership scout’s job is to identify members who could be good prospects for committees or other leadership groups. It’s a good job for anyone who meets or talks with a lot of members, or has a wide professional network, for example, past chapter leaders, committee chairs and members, and staff.

Even if the members they identify are not yet qualified for board or committee service, they may be interested in getting involved in another way. For example, they could be a good fit for an advisory group, task force, or an ad hoc or micro-volunteering role to start.

**DEVELOP A CHAPTER LEADERSHIP TRAINING PROGRAM.**

Members don’t always have access to leadership training at work, and even if they do, leading a chapter requires a different mindset and skill set. Chapters may not have the resources or bandwidth to develop an effective leadership training program on their own, so this is where National comes in.

National is better positioned to provide training resources to chapters. National staff can also spot good resources or practices used by one chapter and share them with the rest of the chapter network.

Leadership training can be provided via a mix of:

* In-person sessions
* Live or on-demand webinars and videos
* Formal and informal mentoring programs
* Leadership academies for members who are selected through a competitive application and interview process
* Buddy or mentor programs

Another option: **recruit a group of leadership apprentices** who help chapter leaders with short-term tasks. These emerging leaders have the opportunity to get involved at a deeper level without having to take on a formal role and responsibility.

Leadership training programs help members develop a strategic mindset and an understanding of chapter and association governance. During training, they get the opportunity to develop and deepen relationships with other prospective, current, and past leaders. They also learn what to expect as a chapter leader and how to lead in a sustainable way.

“Sustainable” is the operative word here.