

HOW TO HAVE A SUCCESSFUL VOLUNTEER ORGANIZATION

By John Sweney

Most of us participate in at least one volunteer organization — a club, association, committee, or affinity group. With all these types of groups, I have found a common strategy for success which I call the “Four G’s”: **G**ather, **G**row, **G**ive and **G**et.

If you are a leader or an active contributor to any volunteer organization, use your influence to make sure that all four of these elements are considered when setting goals, allocating resources, and developing programs for your members.



Volunteer Services

I am a member of five car clubs, five professional associations and a civic club. I have volunteered for leadership roles in alumni groups, foundations, and business groups. Here are some examples of the Four G’s in practice:

GATHER

Clubs, associations and groups are comprised of members with something in common — an interest, a cause, an experience. A first priority of the organization is to create ways for the members to gather together to share and reinforce the common bond. Great vehicles for gathering include:

- Outings or excursions, where you go someplace as a group and create a new shared experience. For example, my college alumni club is taking a [boat tour of the Port of Houston](#).
- Seminars or workshops, where you learn something, but also have time set aside for socializing and networking. For example, one of my car clubs is conducting a [technical seminar](#) at a garage in Austin, inviting members to bring their cars for expert evaluation.
- Meets or shows, where members can display the results of their efforts and be recognized by their peers for their accomplishments. For example, another car club is holding a [show-off and judging of cars in a regional meet](#). Awards are given for cars, and volunteers are honored for their service.
- Parties or socials, where eating and drinking is the backdrop for building relationships and getting to know each other better. For example, a local professional association has a regular happy hour every month.

GROW

All of us strive to become better people, better members of our communities, better in our relationships, better in our occupations, and better in our skills, knowledge and experience. Organizations can help their members advance themselves by creating opportunities to grow and learn.

- Seminars or workshops are not just for networking! A local professional group conducts regular seminars on topics of interest, usually tapping the knowledge of members as presenters. I have presented or moderated several such panels, and the key to a great panel is to make sure that each presenter a) adds real value for the participants and b) avoids over promoting themselves or their companies. At one national car club meet, I am sitting in a seminar on wood refinishing for automobiles and I learn enough to know that I should leave this art to the professionals!
- Resource libraries made available online or through a central office — often leveraging the presentations given in seminars or workshops — can help spread the

collected knowledge of the group. [SlideShare](#) is one way to distribute PowerPoint presentations to your members. Some organizations also maintain helpful “how to” videos on specific topics and distribute them on YouTube. In fact, YouTube now has a billion subscribers and hundreds of thousands of new videos every day on any topic imaginable. (Forty years ago, I learned to [make an omelet by watching Julia Child!](#)) Your group can benefit from these resources, and — more interestingly — contribute to the universe of information as well!

GIVE

Every successful volunteer organization creates opportunities for members to give something of value to the group. For charitable organizations, contributions of money are obvious, but being able to give of oneself is equally important.

- [Volunteering for the board of directors](#) and various leadership roles is a common way for the members to give to the group; that makes it important for the organization to rotate those roles among the members to avoid burnout and give more members the opportunity to lead.
- Coaching other members is another way to give back. Most colleges have some sort of alumni career interchange that allows people to give career advice to students and other alums.
- Coordinating or taking responsibility for one important thing in the group is a great way to give back. For example, in one organization I am a member of, I do not serve on the board or in a leadership position, but instead I coordinate one specific event each year.

GET

Finally, members of any organization should be able to get something of value beyond the opportunities to gather, grow and give. The participation rates may be low in many cases, but the availability of added-value services helps to cement the relationships that the members have to the organization

- College groups often provide career tools and discounts on credit, insurance or [travel](#).
- Professional associations provide [job postings](#).
- One car clubs loan out rare, special or seldom-needed tools to their members.
- Most organizations have some sort of magazine or newsletter that ties the group together and provides a platform for broad communications. They are often award-winning, well-written and beautifully designed!

FINALLY

For any volunteer group or organization to be successful for the long run, it is vital to incorporate Gather, Grow, Give and Get into the plan. In addition, I recommend following Uncle John’s Rules for Organizational Participation Excellence (ROPE).

1. **Communicate** constantly to all members.
2. Keep **membership open** to as broad a range of people as possible.
3. If someone volunteers to lead something, **they get to decide how to do it** (in compliance with any written by laws or guidelines, of course), and you get to volunteer to help them if you like. You do not get to tell them how to do it, unless they ask you.
4. If you feel strongly that something should be done a certain way, you have just **volunteered to lead it!**

5. Everything is done **transparently**, but few things actually require a committee decision.

Have a great volunteer experience! ♦

~ John Sweney is a Silver Fox Advisor

