

Guide to Growing An Interact Club

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Every Interact Club has the potential to become a large, dynamic, thriving Rotary-sponsored service club for youth ages 12-18, and to provide incredible leadership development opportunities for its members. However, the truth is that most Interact Clubs tend to average 15-25 actual members. While they may experience an occasional spike in membership, the clubs struggle with developing consistent leadership that can sustain their growth beyond this average size.

It is a given that every Interact Club must have an effective, ongoing membership recruitment plan, and that attention must always be given to the recruitment of “underclassmen,” to assume that a club has both a continuing membership and leadership when the club’s current leadership graduates and moves on into Rotaract, Rotary’s next step beyond Interact. However, the biggest challenge for most Interact Clubs is not that of attracting members, but instead that of retaining members, and continuing to build and grow a club from year-to-year.

The fact is that there are 5 proven principles that, if understood and put into practice, will enable any Interact Club to begin and sustain growth — with an unlimited potential in eventual size. I will first state those five principles in a brief, outline form, and will then go on to explain them more fully.

Principle #1: Building on Historical Experience is Essential

Principle #2: Development of a Team with Delegation of Responsibilities is Required

Principle #3: The Three C’s are Mandatory Elements

- Communication
- Coordination
- Coaching

Principle #4: There is No Substitute for Adequate Planning & Preparation

Principle #5: Sufficient Space is Required for a Club to Grow

Principle #1: Building on Historical Experience is Essential.

“Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” George Santana’s shared pearl of wisdom concisely sums up the first important reason most Interact (and Rotary) Clubs never grow beyond an average size. Each newly-elected group of club officers tend to be confident that they know what is best for their club, and they spend their year re-inventing the wheel.

Progress is made, and growth begins to be possible, when club leadership is willing to discover, learn from and utilize the successes and failures of those who have preceded them in leadership of the club. A good example is Mohave High Interact’s annual Parents’ Night. Held near the beginning of the school year, the club officers will prepare and present an informative evening program for the parents of club members, to introduce themselves as the club leaders, share the club’s programs and projects calendar for the year, along with some of the club’s past successes, and discuss how parents, family and friends can help support the club through donations to the school that qualify for both an Arizona tax credit and a federal income tax deduction. Past experience has shown that, if personal invitations are addressed and mailed to the parents, a large number of them will attend this very informative and inspirational evening. However, every other method of attempting to get the parents there that has been tried by different groups of officers has always resulted in discouragingly small turnouts of the parents. It takes advance planning and a lot of work to use the proven successful method to develop an annual event like this that has the potential to grow each year. However, every officers’ group

that insists on their right to reinvent the wheel winds up being doomed to repeat the failures of their predecessors — no matter how great and wonderful their presentation may be to the few parents who show up to see and hear their message. So an opportunity for the club to grow is wasted, as well as the time, efforts and resources of the club. And it also becomes a blow to the officers', advisors' and club members morale when there are only minimal results from a key event. While those officers will tend to want to make excuses and blame someone or something, the fact is they have refused to learn from, and to build on, proven past experience.

How does a club avoid this pitfall that can prevent it from growing? Any Interact Club is fortunate if it has within its team of longtime Rotarian and/or Faculty Advisors an historical knowledge base that can benefit each new group of club leaders that is elected. But it is especially helpful if a club will develop and keep a record of the lessons learned about best methods and practices related to the club's traditional key events each year that incoming officers can reference, and that they can utilize during an annual leadership training and planning retreat before their year of club leadership begins.

New officers, and new Advisors — no matter how smart or talented they may be — will not possess this historical knowledge of the club. The fact is they do not know what they don't know. So without some way to reference past lessons learned, and a desire and willingness to build on them, they will operate within the realm of their collective limited experience; and their year will be spent wasting time and resources, reinventing the wheel for each major event and project. No club can break out of the mold of being an average size club and grow when this is happening each year.

Principle #2: Development of a Team with Delegation of Responsibilities is Required.

Teams of Rotarian and Faculty Advisors are essential for any Interact Club to grow, and sustain growth, past the average size. Both kind of Advisors have a life and other responsibilities outside of Interact. There is a limit to how much any single Advisor can do, and how many club projects and events that Advisor can and will be able to be there to supervise. Consequently, every Interact Club will be limited in the scope of how many service projects and other activities it can plan and execute by the availability of its Advisors.

Having said that, it must be recognized that Interact at its essence is all about taking action, and collectively making good things happen. No one joins and remains a member of any club just to attend its meetings. If members cannot be recruited and engaged in meaningful service projects, they will not be attracted to, or remain as members of, any Interact Club. Consequently, the greater the number of members a club recruits, the more projects must be exponentially planned, in order to provide enough essential opportunities for those members to be engaged in meaningful service experiences.

A new Advisor of a large club repeatedly complained, "This club has too many projects!" The fact was that the club did not have enough projects to sustain its growth. The problem was that the Advisor wanted to be in control of all the club did, and therefore was insisting the club cut back what it had been doing to the number of events that would fit into this Advisor's busy schedule. To do that automatically limits a club to being the average size, because that is all a single Advisor can possibly handle.

To be able to grow beyond the average size, a team of Advisors must be recruited, and the required supervisory responsibilities must be delegated to other members of the team. Our largest Interact Club in the district, with a membership of more than 300, has a longtime lead Faculty Advisor, who now has at least nine Assistant Faculty Advisors — in addition to a team of Rotarian Advisors. That club will carry out more than 100 projects per year. At Mohave High, at one time we had a lead Faculty Advisor, an Assistant Advisor and at least two other Faculty members who were on call to help supervise specific events. Multiple Advisors, both Rotarian and Faculty, are simply a necessity for club growth. Otherwise, a club will be automatically limited in what it can do, and how many members it can effectively serve.

So where do the Club Officers fit into this picture? They are the actual leaders of the club. While Advisors are

required to coach these leaders and supervise the club's activities, they should *not* be "running" the club. Club Officers need to be trained to effectively plan and conduct the meetings, as well as the projects and the activities of the club. They are fully capable of doing this, and of getting the job done — *if* they are working as a Team with their Advisors. However, responsibilities must be delegated within the team of Officers and Advisors, and there must be required accountability, or nothing will ever succeed. Neither a lone Officer nor a lone Advisor will ever result in the growth of a club.

Principle #3: The Three C's are Mandatory Elements

- Communication
- Coordination
- Coaching

For at least the past 8 years, the Mohave High Interact Club has held an annual weekend training and planning week prior to the beginning of school for its incoming Officers and Advisors. (This has also become the practice of the Interact District Council and its Advisors.) It is understood, when the officers are elected, that participation in the annual Officers' & Advisors' Retreat is mandatory. If either Officers or Advisors are permitted to miss this essential annual Team Training event, the club will inevitably encounter problems during the year. Participation in the retreat is essential to assure that all members of the team have been given the opportunity to have their input in developing the schedule, goals and plans for the year ahead that will become "the track the club will run on," and that everyone is on the same page.

The annual retreat is the most important Team-building event, as well as the key planning event. It provides the opportunity to step back and "view the forest, rather than just seeing the trees." It requires Officers and Advisors to review together ongoing programs and projects, to evaluate them, and to determine what can be learned and utilized to build on from past experience. It also provides time for looking at key issues, doing some collective problem-solving, and for visioning about what the club is capable of attempting and accomplishing — beyond where it is now. Interact clubs that attempt to function and grow simply through scheduled Officers' Meetings — however frequently or infrequently they are held — can never replicate in any measure that which can be accomplished in a well-planned weekend retreat that includes all of its Officers and Advisors.

The annual retreat, however, is just the beginning of a successful, growing year for a club. The goals set and the plans made at a retreat will be a worthless expenditure of time and effort unless there is structure and determined follow-through during the year. This is where "The Three C's" come into play.

Effective Communication is essential at every level. The Officers and Advisors Team members must be kept abreast of what each is doing, or misunderstandings, hurt feelings and disharmony will be inevitable, and it will poison the club. A social media team messaging system is strongly recommended, along with a monthly meeting, to assure that plans made at the retreat are on track, that progress is being reported, and that all of the team members are remaining on the same page.

That communication must also be effectively established and maintained between the Club Officers and the club members. In far too many cases, messages believed to have been delivered are not actually messages received by those club members. Their minds may be elsewhere when something is announced at a club meeting, or they may not have seen the poster that was created. If the message is not delivered and repeated by several different methods, club leadership must expect that club members will *not* understand what they need to know to agree to participate, or to show up when expected for any event or project. One of the most effective systems of communication is to divide up the club members among the officers (and perhaps the officers' selected "deputies," if it is a large club), and for the officers to consistently follow up by delivering the essential messages to their assigned members, by whatever means is deemed to work the best for their group.

Coordination between the Officers and Advisors Team members is also absolutely essential. Who has agreed to do what, and when? Communication and coordination must go hand-in-hand to prevent the ball

from being dropped when incorrect assumptions have been made, instead of always making certain that all of the members of the team understand “who is on which base,” and what still needs to be done to successfully prepare for and complete every project and event. Mutual respect and consideration between the team members must always be expected and required for any team to be able to function together successfully.

Coaching is an essential function of the Advisors. What does that involve? A top basketball coach during this year’s “March Madness” explained that effective coaching involves requiring Discipline and Accountability. Coaches will teach the principles of the game, and will help guide and hone each player’s skills to help him/her and the team reach their potential. But most important, as that basketball coach said, is requiring the players to be disciplined enough to function as a winning team, and to be accountable for their performance in the roles they have accepted as members of the team. Coaches will work together to develop a game plan, but it is the players who must successfully play the game — or the team can expect to lose a lot of games.

Sometimes Club Officers (whether Interact, Rotaract or Rotary) have assumed they need no coaching, and that they should be left alone to play the game on their own. When that happens, it is always a recipe for disaster — or at least for mediocre performance. Once again, they do not know what they don’t know. They will always be limited by the extent of their own collective personal experience. As leaders, we must never outgrow our need or desire to benefit from the experience of mentors, coaches and advisors, in order to achieve our best performance as leaders. We all have more to learn, and we all need coaching.

Principle #4: There is No Substitute for Adequate Planning & Preparation.

The biggest problem I observe with both Rotary and Interact Clubs is that lazy club leaders persist in believing they can get away with cutting corners and “winging it,” rather than applying themselves to do the necessary work to be fully prepared. They are cheating their clubs, whose members expect and deserve more from them than they are delivering.

Adequate lead time is required to make most projects succeed. Part of the responsibility of leadership is to plan out on their calendars a step-by-step schedule of the essential things that must be done by certain dates prior to any project, activity or event, in order for it to succeed. While leaders may be able to be lucky enough to “get by” on rare occasions by doing everything at the last minute, that won’t work most of the time. Last-minute planning and preparations almost always result in having to settle for poor or mediocre results.

Interact leaders always need to be aiming for excellence, and for doing it better this year than it was done last year. That is the way sustained growth of clubs is achieved — moving onward and upward, one step at a time. Half-hearted efforts on the part of leaders cost them the respect of their followers, and the less-than-the-best results don’t fool anyone. Everyone knows it could, and should, have been better — if the leaders had provided the committed leadership promised and expected.

I will say it again and again: *“No organization ever succeeds beyond the shadow of its leadership.”*

If the leaders are not fully committed, the members will not be either. If the leaders do not have their act together to begin and end meetings on time, the members will begin showing up late, or soon will not be showing up at all. It is a proven, inevitable consequence. I believe it is close to being criminal to waste volunteers’ time because their leaders haven’t taken the necessary time to be prepared.

To be worth attending, club meetings need to be:

- Informational
- Inspirational
- Motivational
- And fun!

If your meetings do not contain these elements, holding them will do more damage than they will ever help your club. Don’t just meet for the sake of having a meeting! As previously noted, no one of any age ever joins organizations just to attend their meetings. They join and stay in organizations that are taking collective action

to get the things done the members want to see accomplished through this investment of their time and effort. If they discover what they expected is *not* happening in an organization they have joined, they will soon be gone. If the meetings are helping to assemble people to accomplish together those goals, they will deem them to be worth attending. If not, they won't.

In 99% of the cases of Interact or Rotary Clubs that are struggling, it boils down to a leadership problem — *not* a club membership problem.

Principle #5: Sufficient Space is Required for a Club to Grow.

When consulting with a church, I will tell them that when they are 85% full, they are full. It is time to build a larger assembly area, or to schedule additional services. Otherwise, their growth will be capped where they are.

The principle is the same for an Interact Club. If a person and their friend can't find a seat together, or if they have to stand on the side or in the back of the room, they won't keep coming.

The club may be meeting in the Faculty Advisor's classroom, and that may be convenient for the Advisor. However, it may also be limiting the size your club can grow, if your room is full. At that point it is time for the Officers and Advisors Team to begin thinking about other meeting options that will encourage growth.

However, having said all of that, the most important place for the rubber to meet the road for Interact Clubs is whether or not your members are actually participating in meaningful service projects. Your club may have great meetings, and plenty of space to grow — but if your club leaders have not succeeded in recruiting and involving all of your members in good, effective, hands-on service projects, your members will still be bailing on you. They were promised — and expected Interact to be — an action club. If it isn't happening for them, they will lose interest, and they won't stick around.

I asked several of the large Interact clubs in California how they manage to take and keep track of attendance at their meetings. They told me they don't even try, because that doesn't matter to them. What matters, they said, is who is showing up and working on their service projects. And there, they do keep track of each member's service hours.

I believe every Rotary Club and Interact Club in our district could learn a valuable lesson from those clubs about what really matters if you want to grow your club.