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leading volunteers

Using creative leadership to create more engagement for volunteers

Case study: declining membership participation; what are the reasons and what can be done to increase membership participation. Case study of JCI Nilom, local chapter of JCI Suriname

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LEADING VOLUNTEERS

Using creative leadership to create more engagement for volunteers

Introduction

Creative Leadership skills are important characteristics of the 21st century executive. Leading volunteers has even more always been a challenge, and nowadays is continuing to be an challenging experience. Knowing what motivates them and what to do to keep that motivation high is an important role for executives of voluntary organizations. Creative Leadership skills are becoming bigger assets every day, to be able to ensure dedication, motivation, engagement and commitment.

Creative Leadership, however, is more than just a new way to lead others; it is a new way to look at situations, making use of non-conventional methods to solve conventional problems and all about encouraging everyone around you to make full use of their creativity.

This research paper focuses on finding the reasons for declining membership participations within JCI Nilom and the answers on how to turn this decline into a decrease.

In the first chapter I give an overview of JCI Nilom and its membership profile. This chapter also includes the research problem and research question as well as the research objectives and methods. The second chapter describes the four steps taken to find the answer on the research question. In the third chapter I describe the creative sessions that were organized with the members of JCI Nilom. In the fourth chapter I describe the solutions and action steps that are as result of the creative session, while in the 5th chapter I give an evaluation of the proposed solutions over a short period of three months.

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1. Background

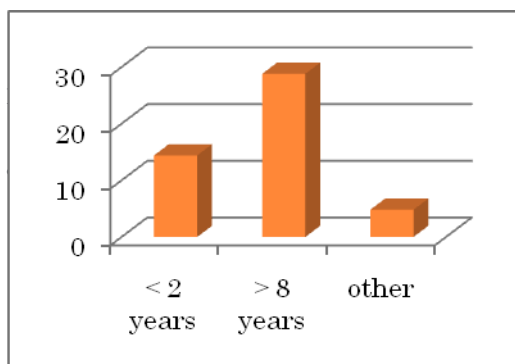
JCI Nilom is one of the thousands chapters within JCI (Junior Chamber International). JCI is an worldwide federation of young leaders and entrepreneurs, with approximately 200.000 members between 18 and 40 years in more than 120 countries and territories.

In Suriname there are currently 6 local chapters (local organizations), part of JCI Suriname, the National Organization. JCI has an “one year to lead” principle, which means that executive boards of local, national and international bodies are chosen every year. Members get only one year to be in a certain position. After their “one year to lead” they have to move on and make place for the next person in line. For positions in the board of directors elections are held yearly, while other positions are appointed by the chairman of the board (local/national or international president).

JCI Nilom is the largest chapter of JCI Suriname, consisting of 48 young men, mostly from the private sector. About 30% is entrepreneur or self-employed, while the rest has supervisory, management and executive jobs in the Surinamese private sector.

Ever since JCI Nilom was founded, 37 years ago, it has been the leading chapter in JCI Suriname. This leading role could be seen in the projects with their big impact on the Surinamese society, the active participation and the successes of the individual members within their careers or business. Also the number of international awards the chapter has won on JCI conferences and congresses for the excellent projects conducted. JCI Nilom members were not just members, but a big group of friends, who used to support each other even in private life or business when necessary.

In the past few years a lot has changed for JCI Nilom. Membership participation has been declining, leading to projects that can't be executed or are improperly executed because of the lack of active members. Membership recruitment strategies in the past 5 years have led to membership growth every year, creating an steady flow into the chapter. However of the 30 new members that joined the organization, only 4 stayed beyond their first 3 years. Currently JCI Nilom consists of members with an membership age of >8 years (60%) and members with an membership age of < 2 years (30%). For the organization this means that the largest part of the members has a lot of experience, participated in projects and have been in different positions within the board of directors. The “young” members are inexperienced and sometimes lack the ability and skills to take leading positions in projects.



JCI Nilom has a special counsel, known as the JCI Nilom key members institute. This counsel consists of a small group of experienced members, mostly past chapter presidents, who are involved in policymaking for the chapter. The chairman of the institute is also legal advisor to the chapter president.

Research problem and research question

Of the 48 members of JCI Nilom, almost 60% has not actively participated with meetings, projects and other activities of the organization in the past 2 years. Because of this, young members lack guidance, leading to poor performance and poor execution of projects. During some meeting decision making is altered because there is no quorum, and the organization is losing its image of being a master in conducting effective and efficient meetings. The once so active and thriving leading chapter of JCI Suriname is now struggling for survival.

In this regard, this study seeks to find the answers or strategies to change the tide, to bring back the motivation and to increase the membership participation.

To ensure a successful creative process (*Mumford et al., 1991*) the central research question has been defined as specific as possible;

“What should be done to increase the membership participation.”

Research objective

The research objective is to use creative ways to find a solution to the problem, implement it and to analyze to find out if the problem was solved.

Research method

To seek for the underlying reasons for the problem, and solutions to create a sustainable strategy to increase membership the following methods are used:

- group hearings with all members of JCI Nilom
- group hearings with JCI Nilom key members
- discussions with directors of other local organizations in the world
- survey conducted by one of the members
- online discussion forum
- using the data gathered from the hearings, surveys and discussion, some strategies were proposed and discussed with the JCI Nilom key members. These strategies were implemented and the effects within a 3-month period are reported in this paper.
- desk research into the topic of creative leadership and creative problem solving.

2. Defining the problem

To find the answer on the central research question the following steps were taken:

1. *Key members institute*: The idea about the research was first discussed with the members of the Key members institute. This discussion was done through the online forum for key members over a period of 3 weeks. This discussion resulted in input from 11 key members, who were discussing the pros and cons about the research idea, after which the idea was approved by the majority.
2. *Discussion during membership meeting*: during a membership meeting the issue of declining membership participation was discussed. The attending members were divided into two groups. The first group had to brainstorm about reasons why membership participation was declining, while the second group had to brainstorm about ways to increase membership participation. Both groups needed to focus on quantity of ideas, not on the quality. To encourage the brainstorming process a prize was announced for the group with the most ideas. Both groups had 15 minutes for the brainstorming session and 3 minutes to present their list.
3. *Open forum*: at two occasions; during a membership meeting and a social activity members were invited to “speak out”; say what’s on their mind regarding the projects and activities of the chapter, chapter management and about the leadership off the board of directors. All members were invited to continue the discussion on the online forum for members.
4. *Discussion with JCI leaders from other countries*: during the past 6 months online discussions were held about membership participation trends in other countries. Countries participating in the discussion were: Panama, Venezuela, Dominican Republic, Barbados and Trinidad. During the 2008 American Leadership Academy and the 2008 Conference of young American leaders, both JCI events hosted in Panama earlier this year (April - May 2008), chapter presidents from 21 countries discussed the issues on membership participation and their view on the reasons why it is declining.

For this research, step two and three were considered to be the most important, because these stages provided members the opportunity to give their input about what they think has to change and how it should be changed.

3. Creative sessions

Membership meeting

During membership meeting, 30 minutes were allocated to have a discussion about the declining membership participation. With a variance on the method by Butler & Scherer (Butler & Scherer 1997, "alternative solution generation"), the attendees were divided into two groups; one to discuss the reasons for the declining of membership participation while the second group discussed way to increase membership participation.

Following the methods of the Divergent CPS tool *brainstorming* (Osborn 1953,1957,1963), both groups received the following instructions:

- Defer judgment
- Go for quantity
- Make connections
- Seek novelty

To encourage the brainstorming process, I announced that the group with the most ideas would be receiving a prize as the winner.

At the end of the 20 minutes both groups were invited to present their ideas.

Putting the ideas of both groups next to each other, everyone was invited to look for links between the two lists. (figure 3.1).

As figure 3.1. on the next page demonstrates, not for every listed reason for decline there was an idea how to increase the membership participation. However, looking at the number of arrows leading to the cell "more retention" ($\pm 30\%$) it is evident that for most of the members the best solution is membership retention.

Other important factors we need to work on within JCI Nilom:

- Knowledge transfer
- Communication with the members

Feedback from members

The participating members had very positive feedback on this session, because it provided them with the opportunity to be involved in the process of strengthening our chapter. It also allowed them to think about their own contribution to the success of JCI Nilom. The creative approach stimulated the participants to look at the organizations from another angle, letting out the "usual and standard" image they have of the organization (Eduard Povel). As some of them said, this was a good start towards a new and better approach.

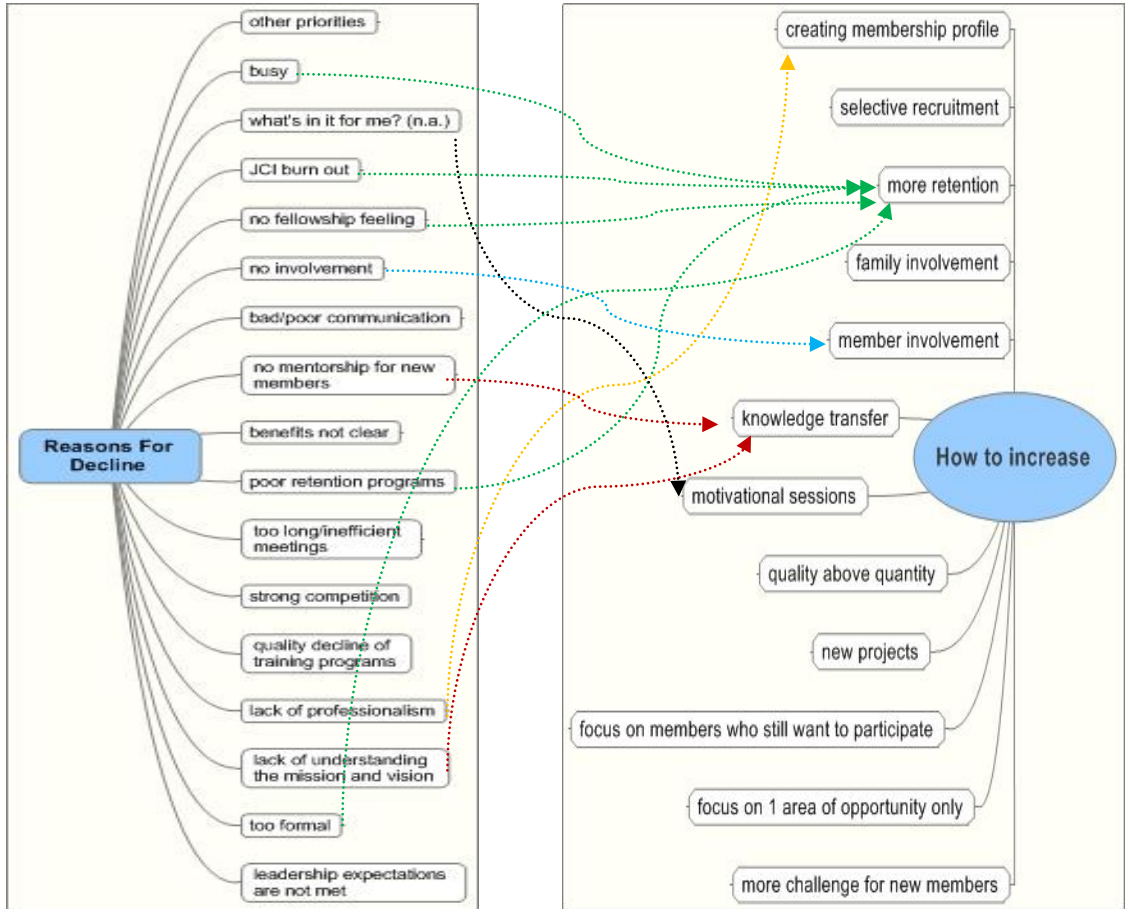


Figure 3.1 Linking reasons for the declining of membership participation to ideas how to increase it.

Open forum

The open forum with members was organized at two moments, first during the membership meeting following the discussion as described in paragraph 3.1 and for the second time during a social activity with the members.

During the first open forum, which was held directly after the discussion as described in 3.1, members discussed the various ideas that they listed and presented as a result of the creative brainstorming session.

By doing so, I led the CPS process from the divergent into the convergent phase (*Byttebier, Creativiteit Hoe? ZO!*).

Following the feedback and discussions by the members the problem was narrowed to the following aspects:

- Lack of commitment
- No ownership
- No fellowship

After some more “why” questioning and answering everyone agreed that the main problem within JCI Nilom was **the lack of retention**. One member described it as follows: *“because there are not enough retention activities, members don’t interact with each other besides during the formal meetings. Because of this there are no special bonds of friendship and fellowship, which is one of the principles of the organization¹. As a result members don’t feel committed to support each other with their projects. Knowing this, some member refuse to chair JCI Nilom projects.”*

As a test case, a informal “get-together” was organized at the home of one of the members. During this event I asked the group (which was bigger this time) again to share their ideas about how to increase membership participation. Besides answers such as “new projects”, “more training”, and “more business opportunities” the number one idea was organizing more retention activities.

International orientation

During the American Leadership Academy and the 2008 Conference of the America’s, both in Panama (May), various discussions were held with local presidents from other countries. Many of them had the same problem with their membership, but not all of them really knew what to do. However there were a lot of ideas, resulting in a productive exchange of best practices between the various nations. Although some local differences were evident, most of the answers led to membership retention, proving that JCI Nilom was not the only chapter dealing with this difficulties.

¹ See JCI creed in annex

4. Turning ideas into solutions

After discussing the results of the various discussions and open forum with the JCI Nilom board of directors and the key members institute, the decision was made to make some major changes into to chapter business plan. Part of the changes was to increase the number of retention activities and include more, creative ways of retaining members. To ensure the commitment and ownership of all the members, the following action steps were produced during a membership meeting;

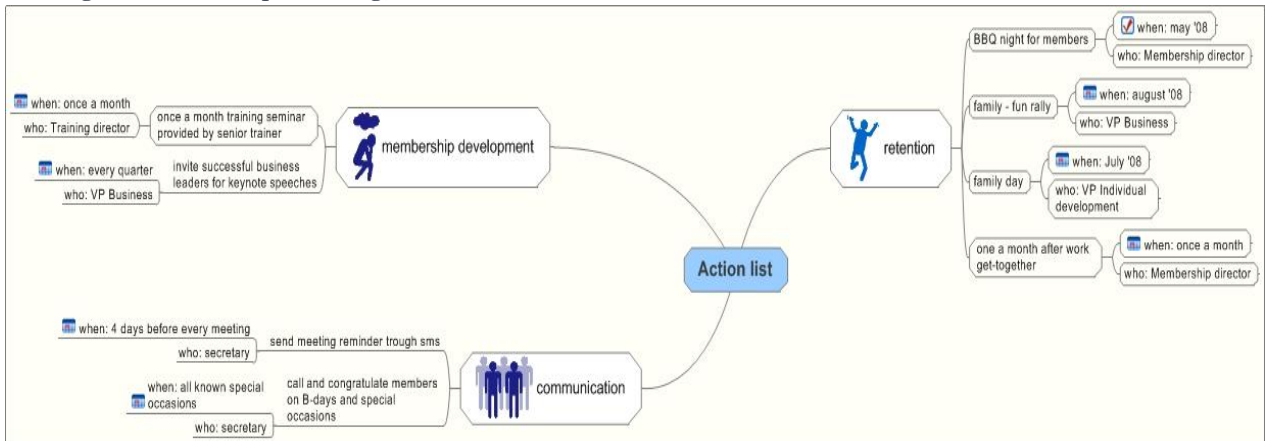


Figure 4.1 Action steps to increase membership participation (enlarged version can be found in the attachments)

A chapter development plan was written, with these easy-to- do action steps, and the Vice President for Individual Development got the responsibility to make sure that this plan would be properly executed.

Important to know, that although there are a number of activities during the year, I don't expect every member to be participating with all of them. However, I do believe that we will be able to attract at least 70% of the members to participate at each activity.

5. Evaluation of the implemented plan over a 3 months period

Although 3 months are very short to have a good evaluation of the implemented solutions, it can certainly give good insights about the progress. With 3 months already passed by since the implementation of the chapter development plan there are already some significant positive changes;

- Membership participation during meetings has increased with 15%
- Membership participation during informal activities has increased with 40%
- Members are taking the lead in motivating inactive members to participate more
- One member started a survey to gather more information on membership expectations

6. Conclusion

In conclusion I could say that using the process of Creative Problem Solving resulted in some very good, and above all usable solutions to tackle the problem of declining membership participation. In the past board of directors spend a lot of time discussing ways to create more engagement for members, but this time it was done the other way around.

For me this also relates in companies and other profit organizations; very often the company directors, managers etc. come up with ideas and solutions without consulting the employees. A lot of these ideas and solutions are not successful, because the employees don't feel any ownership.

Using the CPS process, I've learned that in voluntary organizations the need for ownership is high also, maybe even higher, since volunteers are not being paid for their work. Another important thing I've learned is that membership retention is a very important way to keep members active. Membership retention gives the individual the opportunity to fulfill his need for social interaction (Maslow)².

One remarkable comment from one of the members was that time (or the lack of it) is no reason for members not to participate. This refers to a part of one of JCI's official courses. During this training, specially for chapter leaders, they learn that time is no reason, *because everyone has time to do something they enjoy*. This is also a clear message that chapter leaders should not just think that members don't participate because they lack time. *If they enjoy being part of this organization, they will participate.* (JCI Achieve – the Chapter Management Course)

As a leader it is important to recognize this and to lead in such a way that every individual keeps motivated to continue to perform as an outstanding volunteer.

² 3rd stage in Maslow's pyramid

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Maslow's pyramid of needs

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Annex

JCI Creed

We believe:

That faith in God gives meaning and purpose to human life;

That the brotherhood of man transcends the sovereignty of nations;

That economic justice can best be won by free men through free enterprise;

That government should be of laws rather than of men;

That earth's great treasure lies in human personality;

And that service to humanity is the best work of life.

C. William Brounfield