

Setting Your Chapter On Fire Looking For Champions

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I want to begin by telling you I served 30 years in the U.S. Marine Corps, around the world, on four battlefields, then 17 years as a federal civilian with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers — again, around the world. At age 65 I found myself in Iraq dodging bullets and missiles with 60 other civilian Army Engineers as we rewired and re-electrified the battered nation of Iraq.

So I speak with some authority when I tell you that the men and women who have served this nation in and out of uniform are champions.

Now, we tend to think of those on the football field, in hockey, baseball, basketball, tennis and golf as champions. I don't care who you suggest, they don't hold a candle to the sacrifice and bold heroism I've seen federal workers exhibit in the field and in the office. Those are America's champions.

However, in my 12 years with NARFE, I watched the emphasis begin to slide to the Headquarters staff and their important work with our Congress and Senate. But I'm here to tell you the blood and guts of this organization is in the Chapters. Any activity that allows Chapters to die is just a recipe for the death of NARFE. And you and I cannot afford that. If there were no NARFE — especially right now on The Hill — we would have to invent one. So everything you are going to hear from me, from this point on, is about building up Chapter membership, making them healthy, and keeping them in strong support of our NARFE efforts in Washington, D.C.

But we might as well accept some hard facts. One of the most common assumptions when building and leading an organization is that if you build it, they will come. But face it, you're not Kevin Costner and this isn't "Field of Dreams." You're better off to assume they won't come. That way, you're already thinking of creative ways to get people engaged.

That's what this session today is all about. Giving you some creative ground to build on, some things to keep in mind when the going gets tough.

And, incidentally, we do this because you, right here today, you are among those champions. You come from a field of champions who have seen the elephant. You have your stories to tell. You deserve the career benefits and the retirement you have chosen. Because you are here today, I salute you for choosing to share what you know, what you

hope for, what you can see ahead of us — with other federal champions. Thank you for being here.

So let's talk about why.

“Presiding Over A Successful Chapter Is A People Problem; Not A Planning Problem”

Perhaps your local NARFE Chapter President is lying awake nights; can't sleep because he hates to live with problems. He'd rather solve problems. He needs a strategy.

So, what is he worrying about?? People.

Which is precisely what he ***should*** be worrying about. However hard it is to plan a smart strategy, it's even harder to get people to execute that strategy. That's especially true with volunteers; you just can't order volunteers around. But a poorly executed strategy, no matter how well-planned, is worthless.

In other words, your NARFE Chapter's biggest strategic challenge isn't strategic thinking — it's strategic acting.

If we were to depict the challenge graphically, it would look like arrows pointed in every direction:

What it needs to look like is a shower of arrows all pointed in the same direction:

But how to get from the first example to the second one? Most organizations rely on communication plans to make that shift; based on saving your job and obeying your supervisor. Unfortunately, strategy communication for volunteers, even if you were able to do it daily, is not the same and does not have enough drive to move people to strategy execution.

If the idea didn't start with them, if they are not bought into it, if they are not committed to it with ideas on how to make it work, it ain't going nowhere.

Because while strategy development and communication are about ***knowing*** something, strategy execution is about ***doing*** something. And the gap between what you know and what you do is often huge. As you attempt to have everyone acting in step, in concert with each other, the gap just gets worse.

Now, the reason most of us miss this and fall into this "gap trap" is because we don't recognize and treat the problem as a human behavior one. We don't necessarily lack planning or buy-in, it's a natural human behavior problem.

If we were going to achieve the "best of all best" results, our Chapter staff and membership would need to be super aligned and laser-focused on the highest-impact actions that will drive the organization's most important outcomes.

But even in well-run, stable organizations, people tend to be misaligned, too broadly focused, and working at cross-purposes. And this is often especially true in non-profits and volunteer membership organizations.

If we can admit we have seen this in our own commercial organizations, in government organizations and non-profits, imagine how susceptible are the Chapters filled with people who have reached the point in life where we just want to retire and enjoy life. But there are hard and fast reasons an organization like NARFE exists, and important reasons we need to belong and support NARFE, reasons that have to do with our own financial survival. These are **action** reasons we need to talk about and remind people why we are here.

Therefore, we can see that any time it's critical to focus on strategy – and when isn't the most important strategy question you need to answer is: How can we align everyone's efforts and help them accomplish the organization's most important work? Isn't that why we belong to NARFE -- to accomplish the mission of caring for and protecting what we have earned, the future for ourselves and others.

But perhaps first and foremost, we as Chapter officers, as organizational leaders, must identify the most important goals NARFE needs to achieve over the following months. Those at NARFE Regional and National HQ have created a strategy and product roadmap that needs to be supported by the entire leadership team. The hardest part of this is getting to that one most important thing, the thing that would be a catalyst for driving the rest of the strategy forward.

So, let's take a hard, honest look at what will move us forward.

- First and foremost, name one goal of your chapter. And don't tell me that it is survival, because that's the goal of EVERY organization. So what is the goal your Chapter must achieve in order to benefit its membership? Think about it.
- Will success in the survival of our NARFE Chapter drive the mission of the larger organization forward?
- Are the actions of our Chapter membership supporting, and supported by, our primary goals?
- Will achieving our Chapter goals make a statement to the organization about what's most important? Start small; start with one goal, get everybody on board, achieve it, and move on to a second goal.
- Will our success lead to the execution of NARFE's strategy?
- If we, each one, stretch ourselves, can we accomplish more?

- Are you, as an individual, excited about what your Chapter can accomplish? Do you have an emotional connection to that goal? Do you share it with other members?

If you can answer yes to these questions, your Chapter has the opportunity for a dynamic future before it.

Along with that outcome clarity, we also need to discuss behavioral clarity by identifying the most important behavior that would lead to achieving the outcome. For starters, the behavior that represents trust and transparency. Other people can see right through us when we play games with our words and our actions, and basic trust washes right down the drain. Less than honest effort is what will make the drive for success harder and less likely to achieve. Success needs a full commitment; a full court press.

Who Are the High Impact People In Your Chapter?

First, as a Chapter member yourself, identify the people who are most essential to achieving the Chapter's goals. Doing this is critical because you want to focus your efforts and resources on the people who will have the most impact on the viability of the Chapter. Who do you see as being core to the Chapter's survival? Who already demonstrates organizational authority, and who may already be highly networked. Do your best to identify people with leadership traits at all levels of the organization. As you think about who might be appropriate for building and nourishing the Chapter, ask questions of them: Who has the greatest capacity to affect the forward momentum of our Chapter? Who is an influencer in the organization? Who has the talents, if not to lead outright, to support, sustain and encourage positive organizational behavior? Those are the people you should put into positions that best impact Chapter growth.

Help Them Sharpen Their Focus

Once you have identified and put these key people into position, we need to work with each of them; do more than salute them and walk away. Help them to:

- Identify their key contribution to moving the Chapter forward;
- Determine their pivotal strength that will allow them to make their key contribution; and
- Foresee the game changer, the thing that, if that person improves, will most improve their ability to make their key contribution.

One of the things that makes this process successful is its simplicity. Settle on **one** pivotal strength and **one** most critical game changer. Strategy execution needs to be laser-focused, and one of the biggest impediments to moving our Chapters forward is trying to get forward momentum on **all** our work at once. Simplicity requires that we make choices. What will

have the biggest impact on your Chapter and on your membership? Then, make that one thing happen.

Coaching Sessions Build Cohesion

Once we make sure the right people have the right focus, we need to coach in laser-focused coaching sessions. If possible, join with the Chapter staff 30 minutes before a monthly meeting. Some organizational staffs do this to identify and fix a leader's flaws, but that must not be the focus of this kind of coaching. Here, the staff leaders are coached to focus on making clear headway on their key contribution to the Chapter's movement forward. Only focus on larger behavioral patterns to the extent they are getting in the way of the task at hand; never central to the meeting.

Fire Up Relationships That Will Shrug Off Problems

The senior leadership needs to focus the coaching effort on addressing the typical challenges people struggle with when urged to execute strategy: how to communicate priorities, how to deal with someone who is resistant, how to influence someone who doesn't respond, how to say no to distractions, and so on. Prioritized helping people build relationships, collaborating with trust and transparency. Those members aware of and aligning with the goals of the organization are valuable to driving continued growth and success, a value encouraged by seeing support from the entire leadership team. This also becomes a momentum that builds and encourages future leaders, contributing to the very basic element of the organization: survival of the Chapter.

Protect Your Chapter Relationships

In a team dynamic or a chapter setting it's almost impossible to avoid relational breakdowns. In good times, of course, spirits stay high; flexibility and forgiveness are easy to come by. However, under stress many of us have a tendency to push pressure, blame and frustration towards those who serve alongside us.

This is why it becomes important to focus on "Protecting Your Chapter Relationships." These social connections are the foundation for success within our chapters, just as they are within teams of competition. When relationships fail it becomes impossible to accomplish anything meaningful with your team.

To protect the relationships around you, here are four things to do when breakdowns happen:

- **Trust Their Intentions** – If you look for drama around every corner you are likely to find it, but you are also likely to be the one creating it. ***Protect the relationships around you by assuming the best in people and trusting that their intentions are good.*** It's easy to vilify someone and assume they are

attempting to cause problems, but most of the time the intentions of those around you are good.

- **Know The Difference Between Sliding And Jumping** – Over time each one of us can subtly slide out of alignment. It happens behind the scenes and it's an easy adjustment to correct. There is a big difference between sliding out of alignment and jumping ship. Jumping ship is when you have intentionally decided you are no longer content in your current role. Know the difference between sliding and jumping, because it is often an abrasive element within a chapter or a team of people. It's the reason for the old saw, "There is no 'I' in team."
- **Solve It With Them** – You cannot solve relational breakdowns in a hole, so if you are part of the problem throw down your shovel and stop digging. If there is an issue relationally, it must be solved relationally. Talking it out helps. While it rarely works if we attempt to solve other people's problem for them, what does work is to walk with them through the process of addressing the problem and considering solutions. Concentrate on being a good listener and supporter.
- **Everyone Wants To Win** – It is amazing what happens when you consider a person's end game. *Everyone wants to be on a winning team.* Leading people into solving relational breakdowns is a way of helping individuals and the chapter, or the team, get closer to a win. People want to win, and fixing breakdowns is easier when you know that each of us wants the same thing. Where goals are lacking, help others to set and meet goals. Where talents are lacking, show them ways to build upon what they know. Finally, whether you serve as a leader or a member, always be a cheerleader. There is organizational strength and success in winning.

Now, let's talk about basic leadership for a few minutes, specifically

Six Things That Leak In Your Leadership

Have you ever had a cup of coffee that leaks on you, or a drippy cup of soda? It's the worst. You finally get to the front of the line, get your favorite Starbucks in hand and then notice with every sip a little bit of coffee is splattering on your shirt. It happens.

A leaky cup is frustrating because slowly over time the contents of the cup are lost. Maybe leaky cups are not an issue for you. What about a leaky pipe in your house? Or maybe you have dealt with an oil leak from your car? Leaks are an unfortunate reality in life – the things which are created to hold something good can, over time, develop a leak.

Leaks are not limited to cups, pipes and engines.., we as human beings must deal with internal leaks every once in a while. A leak left unaddressed can cause a mess, maybe big problems down the road.

Pay attention to these six things that will leak in your life:

1. **Vision Leaks** – This is an axiom made popular by Bill Hybels. No matter how sharp and/or passionate we are, no matter your initial level of buy-in, over time vision will leak. Over time we move from, *"I know why we are doing this"* to *"Why does this matter?"* Find ways to remind yourself of the vision – the hope of a better future that fuels you for today. Keep your eyes on the prize.
2. **Attitude Leaks** – Have you ever noticed over time a positive attitude can slowly descend into a negative attitude? For better or worse the attitude you have will leak out to the people around you. Let the attitude which leaks out of you be an attitude you would want others to carry on.
3. **Nearness Leaks** – Relationships are dynamic, always experiencing a move towards closer together or drifting apart. The nearness you have today will leak over time. If you want to continue experiencing nearness -- to your God, to family, friends or coworkers -- then you must be intentional about consistently investing in relationships around you.
4. **Newness Leaks** – Planners and organizers talk about the A-zone and B-zone in life. The A-zone is when everything is new and exciting. The B-zone is where everything is difficult and draining. The exciting feel of "new" will leak. Find a way to make your grass greener instead of looking for greener grass in a new location.
5. **Discipline Leaks** – New Year's resolutions are a great example of the idea that discipline leaks. Burger joints are slow and gyms are busy during the first 30-60 days of the year. However, the intentionality and focus we have when starting something eventually runs low. Consistent discipline over time requires consistent intentionality right now. Finally.....
6. **Gratefulness Leaks** – Time has a way of allowing gratitude to erode. Just because you have a thankful heart today, appreciating the hard work of your chapter members, their own dedication and positive attitudes, does not mean you will feel grateful about them tomorrow. Deliberately cultivate that countenance of gratitude that informs your feelings instead of being informed by your feelings. Don't let anyone or anything take charge of your happiness, your positivity, your gratefulness. It's yours. Enjoy it and share it.

There you have it -- six ways to make it a habit in your life to improvise, adapt and overcome to plug the leaks in your leadership.

Now I have some closing remarks for this session about Setting Your Chapter on Fire . . .

Consider this -- someone in your group knows how to set up a Chapter Facebook page and would probably like to do that as a way to facilitate retirement conversations and share information.

Someone in your group knows something about setting up a web site and would probably like to know more, and NARFE's Webmaster can help lead them through that. It's a learning experience and, if you run into a problem, I guarantee you Tennessee Federation webmaster Ronnie Collins is a great teacher. He just taught a class on it during our Federation Convention in April.

Someone in your group loves to talk to people and would like to set up and manage a "telephone tree" group, each one having two or three people they will stay in touch with, people who cannot or will not attend meetings, but who need the Chapter's good will and support. In my own Chapter, if we didn't have telephone tree volunteers, some of our homebound members would have nobody else checking on them.

Someone in your group knows your community, knows the needs and plans for that community, and can see ways the chapter members can play a part in furthering the progress and best interests of that community. It is always a good idea to build up the chapter's good will within the community as a bank to draw against when it is most needed. Are there charity walks and races to be entered as a group? Are there ways to earn funds for NARFE's Alzheimer commitment? Are there lawns to be cut, leaves to be raked, gutters to be fixed for people who can no longer do it for themselves – where your NARFE Chapter will get the credit?

And don't tell me those of our generation don't want to do that. I was sidelined for a while with a heart problem. My elderly neighbor across the street saw the front lawn wasn't mowed, checked on me, and mowed my lawn for three months until I could do it. I didn't even know the guy that well. I do now! If he had a federal background I would have signed him up and paid his first year's membership!

Someone in your group likes to garden, probably several somebodies. Could your community use a community garden, where the produce can be provided to local non-profit food banks, given to families in need, or sold at local Farmers Markets to support Alzheimer funding or other community efforts?

Someone in your group likes to write about people, and they can prepare news releases for the local news media on what members and their Chapter are doing in the community. Federal workers are organized, creative and engaged people. They deserve the publicity.

These are just a few ideas to keep your Chapter membership engaged with one another and active in the community where you all live. You might suggest the membership take one monthly meeting and do nothing but brainstorm ideas regarding how the membership can support your local community on a continuing basis throughout the year. You may be surprised at how much you learn about one another and the community around you.

When we worked for the federal government we were good, or we wouldn't have made it to retirement. We're still good. But keep your eyes on the prize, this is all about protecting what you have earned.

Throughout your career, you have been working on behalf of the men and women, the families of America. This is no different. May each of you be successful in setting your Chapters afire for you, for your membership, your community, and for NARFE.

One last note – the words in this presentation were mine, but if you like the graphic presentation, that credit belongs to John Wells, a Past Federation President. You all want to discover the John Wells in your Chapter. Unfortunately, John is now moving to Seattle, Washington, and I have to find another John Wells. The search is on!

Thank you.