

## **Stop Being a Super-Leader: Why Doing It All Yourself Is Bad for Your Chapter (and other things I've learned about working with volunteers)**

**By Barbara Gibson, ABC**

Look, up in the sky, it's a bird, it's a plane, no, it's Super-Leader... faster than a speeding e-mail, able to leap member mailings in a single bound! Super-Leaders are amazing, the ultimate IABC volunteers. There's at least one on almost every chapter board, quickly rising to the role of President, and taking the chapter to new heights. They believe in the organization, have tons of enthusiasm and great ideas, and they can always be counted on to take on more. In fact, since volunteers are in short supply, they end up doing almost everything themselves.

Sounds like a good thing, and you're thinking "where can we get more of those," right? But as a recovering SL myself, and an IABC member for more than 15 years, spanning five chapters and two continents, I've figured something out: Super-Leaders are bad for the long-term health of a chapter. Why? Because inevitably, they move on – either they burn out from all the work, or get transferred and move away, or lose their jobs, or get promoted, or have a baby, or even just move up the IABC leadership ladder. And the chapter that depended on them has too few volunteers, and often no succession plan. The increased workload on the remaining board members can result in more resignations, and suddenly a chapter that seemed very strong finds itself seriously struggling.

"But wait," I can hear you saying, "I only do things myself because there's no one else willing to do them," or "it's quicker to do it myself than to take the time to show someone else." Not the point. If you really want to make your chapter bullet-proof, you have to focus your super powers on recruiting volunteers, building more leaders and spreading the work as widely as possible. So how can you do it? Here are a few of the things I've found that work well.

### **Break the work into bite-size pieces.**

Instead of asking one person to take on a job that takes 10 hours a month, break it down to 10 jobs that take one hour a month. It's a lot easier for busy people to say yes to a bite-size commitment. Set a goal of getting every single member involved in at least a tiny way.

### **Create "drive-by volunteerism" opportunities.**

This is my term for a one-off request for help, an in-and-out job that can be completed in one session. Things that fall in this category could include: awards judging, working the registration table for an event, attending a brainstorming session to come up with ideas for programs (this is an excellent one, and will bring in members you've never seen at a meeting). The invitation can say, "If you've been thinking about becoming more active in IABC, but don't have time for an ongoing leadership role, here's your chance to dip a toe in the water."

### **Ask them personally.**

If I've learned anything about volunteer recruitment over the years, it's that hardly anyone will respond to a mass call for volunteers, but almost everyone will say yes if

you ask them personally. Don't be afraid to pick up the phone and call a member you've never met.

**Offer it as a member value, not a request for service.**

It seems so obvious now, that I can't believe I've only just learned this one. But when we ask people to take on a volunteer role, it shouldn't be for a selfless reason. If it were just about doing good, there are lots of worthier causes to give their time to. IABC is a professional association, and we're all here to further our careers. So now instead of trying to slot someone in to a role I need to fill, I start by asking them what they want out of IABC. Do they want a new job, so need exposure to senior people? The program committee is ideal, because they can get to know the guest speakers. Are they consultants, and need maximum networking opportunities? Membership committee members have a built-in excuse for calling and e-mailing both members and non-members, and they can play host at events. Are they looking to build skills they aren't getting to use on the job, like media relations, newsletter writing, website management, event planning? You can find the right volunteer role to meet every need.

**Map out an IABC career path.**

As part of the same conversation, I find it's also good to begin discussing an IABC career path, so we're looking at not only what they need from IABC now, but also where they might want to go longer-term. That gets them thinking ahead, and also gives me an idea of where they could fit in a succession plan.

**Tap the expertise of your senior members.**

Many senior members are no longer actively involved at the chapter level, but that doesn't mean they can't be tapped now and then, and if you can get them interested in a "drive-by" opportunity, you may be able to re-activate them. In the UK chapter, we've recently launched a new program format, the Master Class series, that utilizes senior members to lead a session, hosted at their own facility, with a maximum of 10 participants, talking about their own area of expertise. They're flattered by the invitation, it's easy to arrange and requires very little work. Members who attend get great, interactive face-time with a senior communicator and get a look inside some of the top companies in the area. This is also an easy way to fill out our program schedule without a lot of additional work. We offer these as a members-only benefit, charge £20 each, and the only expense is sandwiches and soft drinks for 11 people (which many of the hosts pick up). So it's also a good moneymaker for the chapter.

**Get your board working to a written plan.**

I'm a big believer in using strategic planning at the chapter board level, and being really disciplined about sticking to your key objectives. When you've got limited volunteer resources, you simply can't do everything. Especially if your board is struggling to keep afloat, it's necessary to cut out all the non-essential activities and ensure that you're executing on the basics. Even a simple task list with deadlines will help you keep your efforts on track.

**Forgive failure to perform, but replace non-performers.**

It's inevitable that you'll have some volunteers who fail to carry out their responsibilities. Real life gets in the way of the best intentions. The day job gets too demanding, or the kids are sick, or a million other things get in the way. It's the

nature of the beast, and it happens to ALL of us (even Super-Leaders) at one time or another. So learn to forgive it, whether it's yourself or one of your board members, and take the guilt out of stepping aside. It may also help to ask the person to at least mentor their replacement, so that you can fill the role with an inexperienced member without overwhelming them. Incidentally, an interim role midway through the board year is easier to fill than a long-term commitment, and may be a great opportunity to reactivate a past leader.

**Line up a successor for every key position.**

My top priorities, in this order, would be: President, Treasurer, Programs, and Membership. If you can, get your President succession string at least 2-deep (a president-elect and someone identified to move into that the following year), and if possible, make sure they both attend the IABC Leadership Institute. In fact, if you've got the funds, the chapter should pay to send as many leaders as possible. In my opinion, it's the best investment you can make in your long-term chapter health.

So, if you really want to be an IABC superhero, take off your cape and tear the big SL off your chest, and build a legacy of strength and stability that will serve your chapter long after you've moved on.

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