



NATIONAL WILDERNESS
STEWARDSHIP
ALLIANCE

How to Revitalize and Grow a Stewardship Group

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About The National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance

The mission of the National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance is to develop a growing network of volunteer-based organizations to provide stewardship for America's enduring resource of wilderness.

Our vision is to see each wilderness area within the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) adopted by a wilderness stewardship organization dedicated to protect and nurture the area's wilderness. We envision effective partnerships between community-based, non-profit wilderness stewardship organizations and all government agencies charged with the management of our national wilderness areas.

NWSA works to improve wilderness stewardship and create an allied constituency for wilderness by connecting stewardship organizations with each other, linking our efforts and experiences, directing groups to resources, and fostering new organizations.

Several of our objectives relate to your efforts to revitalize your group:

- Share knowledge, experience and expertise
- Provide new groups with start-up models of different structures, help them anticipate the questions that typically arise as groups form, and connect them with people who have built successful organizations, Sometimes helping a new group can breathe new life into an established one.
- Sponsor national and regional gatherings of stewardship groups.

If we aren't involved already, please ask us for help! We can offer some direct resources. But more important, we can put you in touch with local volunteer stewards in your area and across the country — volunteers like yourself, but who have already walked this trail and know the way.

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Introduction

This guide is written for people who manage an existing wilderness stewardship organization that are stagnant or in decline. The life cycle of all organizations will include periods of stagnation – how you manage these periods will determine if the group can survive or not.

Sometimes stagnation in your organization might be a blessing in disguise. When faced with adversity we need to rethink and question our core beliefs. This process will either strengthen the beliefs – allowing us to focus on how best to put those beliefs into motion; or will generate new beliefs – allowing us to discover new opportunities.

Groups range in size and scope from a handful of people organized to help manage a local wilderness area to multi-state organizations supporting many wilderness areas. Some groups focus entirely on wilderness, while others include wilderness stewardship as just one subset of interests. While every stewardship organization is unique, most face similar management issues and concerns.

Picture you are stepping into a wilderness. You know every bump in the trail. You can walk the trails in the dark. You find that your love of the wilderness is somewhat diminished. You are in a rut. You miss the excitement and enthusiasm you had when you first explored the wilderness. You want to regain that sense of wonder you had.

Dyan Oldenburg of Training Resources for the Environmental Community (TREC), is one of the great facilitators. When she facilitated a Board Retreat for NWSA, she offered two guidelines:

The FDR Principle: Do something. If it doesn't work, do something else. But do something!

The Keep-Moving Mantra: Good Enough; Minimum Specs; Move On

This guide offers areas to explore when looking to revitalize your stewardship group. Look for ideas that can germinate to fit your stewardship group's situation:

- Why Grow?

- Stagnation and Its Causes

- Breathe New Life into your Stewardship Group

- Examine your Mission

- Plan to Succeed, or Plan to Fail

- Throw in the Towel?

- Phoenix Rising from the Ashes (Conclusion)

Your organization is unique, and your current situation is also unique. Explore these areas to look for ideas on how you can get your group back on track. Modify the ideas to fit your specific needs and situation. Most importantly, take some action. A lot of sweat equity has been put into your stewardship group – make it mean something.

Why Grow?

Why worry if your stewardship organization is growing or not? Your organization manages day-to-day activities, has a good reputation for the work it does for wilderness, and has a routine and efficient program. Isn't it fine to just keep doing what you've been doing?

Your organization might do well for the foreseeable future without concerning yourself with growth – but most organizations will stagnate and wither away without breathing new life into them now and then. Your organization might already suffer from stagnation and decline. Sometimes we are too engrossed in the day-to-day management of our organizations to recognize long-term conditions.

Assessing Your Group

Regular and periodic assessments of your organization are essential to its health. Much like a physical check-up you do with your doctor, a check-up of your organization might reveal issues that can become significant problems if undetected. We recommend the following areas and timeframes to perform your check-ups:

3-5 Year Assessments

You should perform a **complete** assessment of all aspects of management, finances, programs, policies, volunteers, Agency relationships, mission, risk, and any other aspect of your organization. This should be done a minimum of every 3 to 5 years.

How do you make an assessment? You might use rating scales to rate each area. This can help identify areas that need improvement and areas of strength, but numbers alone will not tell the whole picture. Assessments should not be ratings alone. Include the narrative of **why** the area is weak or strong. If you do use rating scales keep them simple. The simplest scale is 1-2:

1. Weak
2. Strong

We recommend that you use even numbers for rating scales. This forces you to avoid sitting on the fence – you have to put the assessment into either a weak or strong category.

Management Assessment

Your management team includes your Board of Directors, officers, and staff leaders (such as an Executive Director or other positions involved with decision making). Assess the team as a whole as well as the individual members.

How well does your management team do its job? Does it have the skills and talents needed for your organization? Is it open to ideas or constructive criticism? Are there job descriptions for the individual positions – and do you update them as needs change?

Financial Assessment

Does your organization have adequate finances to perform the tasks it wants and needs to perform? Do you have sufficient control over money handling? Do you have adequate accounting of where funds come from and where they are spent? Are your finances, and your handling of funds, transparent? Do you have sufficient checks and balances to keep honest people honest? Sometimes embezzlement involves people who were tempted by sloppy money handling. Do you have proper checks and balances in spite of the fact you completely trust those who currently handle funds? Those people won't be there forever and will be replaced with people you don't know as well. Do you have proper checks and balances to satisfy current and potential donors? Do you have a sound idea of how windfalls would be spent?

Program Assessment

Do your programs sufficiently meet their goals and objectives? Do they fit your organization's mission? Do they have sufficient funding? Are they accountable to meet goals and objectives? Is it clear how they fit your organization's purpose? Do you explore ways to make them more effective or efficient?

Policy Assessment

Do you have documented policies, rules, or procedures in place for crucial aspects of running your organization? Sufficient documentation would allow critical functions to continue in the event key personnel is unexpectedly lost – is yours sufficient?

Volunteer Assessment

Do you monitor the performance of volunteers? Do you rely on volunteers to perform mission-critical functions – and if you do, do you review if they perform satisfactorily? Do volunteers understand how the work they do fits the overall goals of the organization? Are volunteers engaged and enthusiastic about the work they do? Do you retain volunteers year to year, or do you have high turnover? Do you explore what motivates your volunteers? Do you adequately appreciate the work they do, or do you assume they all do it for the satisfaction of helping out? Do you consider making some volunteer positions permanent staff (and possibly paid) in order to build accountability for mission-critical functions? Do your volunteers have job descriptions, goals, and expectations?

Agency Relations Assessment

How is the overall relationship with your partner Agency? Do they treat your organization as a respected partner? Do you respect them as well? Do they keep you in the loop on issues that impact your organization's ability to do its work? Do you keep them in the loop? Do you have trust issues? Do you meet periodically, or only when specific needs arise? Are you comfortable approaching them with issues or concerns, or do you walk on egg shells with them?

Mission Assessment

Do you have a mission statement that provides a brief and concise statement of why your organization exists? Is it clear to your staff, volunteers, donors, or partners why your organization exists? Does your organization spend crucial resources on things that don't fit your mission? Some organizations spend a lot of time and stress crafting mission statements without understanding the point is to help identify priorities and keep the organization moving forward. A mission statement should simply be a very short statement that explains why you exist.

Risk Assessment

Your organization is constantly at risk. Dangers lurk at every corner. You can either ignore them and hope they go away (they won't) or you can plan and prepare for them. Identify probable and likely events that might happen to your organization, such as loss of leaders, loss of funding, loss of Agency support, legal action against the organization, theft and embezzlement, and other events that might gravely impact your team. Review steps you should take if the event should happen. Plan and brainstorm while you have the luxury of not being in the midst of the crisis. A plan to follow will help you keep your focus if the crisis should occur.

Also brainstorm steps you can take to prevent the crisis from occurring in the first place, or things that might reduce the impact if they can't be prevented.

They say that hindsight is 20-20. Use your imagination to develop "pre-hindsight". Imagine the event has already occurred and think through what you would do. Develop scenarios, and involve your team in role playing and brainstorming.

Annual Assessments

Annual assessments can be much more abbreviated. These can be simple ratings that let you know if you are moving in the right direction or not. Go through the areas you assess in detail every 3-5 years, and provide a status update on where you stand.

Stagnation and Its Causes

You look back on your organization's history and believe its best days are behind it. What started out as high hopes and excitement about making an impact on the well-being of favored wilderness areas has been replaced with mindless routine.

"Why bother?" has become the typical response to ideas and events.

You find the more often than not you and your team are just going through the motions. Your Board meetings are bogged down in endless trivial matters that accomplish little. Your organization is not advancing nor developing, but is merely doing the same thing over and over – and usually doing less of it and with fewer people.

What causes a stewardship group to stagnate?

Complacency

Some organizations simply get complacent. Management and operations have become routine. The same projects and tasks are performed year after year with little disruption or change. New people might come and go, but the team might consist of the same people doing the same things over and over.

So what harm is there in having a well-oiled machine that operates consistently over time?

The primary concern is that the complacent team will miss opportunities, and will fail to see signs of deterioration. As much as people resist change, they become bored and restless when life becomes routine. The satisfaction of performing a task begins to wear off when it is performed over and over with no variation.

People are uncomfortable with change – but they stagnate and become zombies without it.

If managing your team has become too routine you will miss, or reject, opportunities that may come up that could greatly benefit the organization's long-term goals and survival.

Founder's Syndrome

Sometimes those who created the organization and got it off the ground (or who lead it through other difficulties) can unwittingly become the saboteurs who jeopardize its survival. They don't believe others share their sense of dedication and passion, so they jealously guard responsibility. Or the organization has grown beyond their capabilities to lead.

Note that "founder" is not always a literal term. The person currently pulling all the levers of power in your organization, and keeping it from growing, doesn't have to have been present at the birth of your organization to be a "founder."

See "Institutionalize Your Organization" in "How to Manage a Stewardship Group" for signs you are encountering founder's syndrome, and some suggestions on overcoming it.

A significant effect of founder's syndrome is it will keep your organization from growing. One person, no matter how talented, can not adequately keep an organization alive. A vibrant organization is greater than the sum of its parts – people who are able to share ideas tend to build on each other. For instance, Bob's idea about the volunteer program sparks Janet's memory of how a similar idea was implemented in her former job.

The fact is that humans are social animals. We thrive when we work together. An over-controlling founder stifles initiative, teamwork, and exploration.

Turf Wars

If your organization consists of more than one person you will have cliques and groups that have unique and different interests. Your organizational structure can foster obvious divisions, such as trail maintenance folks, fundraisers, interpretive guides, etc. Sometimes the divisions are less obvious, such as volunteers who come from their own social network outside of your organization. The unique and different interests don't necessarily mean a problem – your trail maintenance crew might have no interest in becoming interpretive guides for instance. Your problem is when these different interests conflict with the interests of the organization as a whole.

Sometimes people lose sight of the forest for the trees. They may jealously guard their turf even if the organization suffers as a result.

Crisis

A crisis can put even the strongest organizations to the test. A crisis that hits a complacent organization, or one suffering founder's syndrome, can leave permanent damage that can't be recovered. This is primarily why it is so critical that you avoid complacency and over-controlling management.

The crisis might be external (such as the loss of a major funding source, loss of a significant contract or agreement, loss of support from partner organizations, lawsuit filed against the organization) or internal (such as tragedies with key personnel, dramatic internal politics, firing or forced resignation of popular personnel). A crisis can shake the very foundation of the organization and threaten its very survival. While the initial crisis is far from stagnant, the long-term reaction to it may cause an organization to drift aimlessly.

One of the best ways to handle a crisis, of course, is to avoid it. Perform the risk assessments mentioned above to brainstorm possible situations your organization might encounter and to think up responses and preventative measures.

If Things were Fine, You Wouldn't be Stagnant

If your organization is stagnant, start with simple plans or implement just a few changes in order to break the status quo. You will encounter resistance. People do not want to change, even if the current situation is bleak or stagnant. Constantly remind yourself that change is absolutely necessary. If your organization was growing and vibrant you wouldn't need to do things differently – but it isn't, so you do. The only way to bring your organization back to the path of growth and prosperity is to set goals and make plans on how to achieve them. Continue to react

to situations, rather than driving them, and your organization will continue on the path of decline.

It is possible that random events might help your team grow. A wealthy donor may suddenly decide to donate their net worth to your stewardship group. How likely is this, especially if you aren't doing anything to actively court donors? And even if you did obtain such an unexpected windfall, what would you do with it? Without a plan, your organization would find itself just like many lottery winners who become flat broke a few years after winning the jackpot.

Stagnation is the difference between routine and a rut, and can be in the eye of the beholder. Unfortunately, your eyesight is not always the best judge. You are so involved with your stewardship group that it may be difficult to see long-term trends. Perform the 3-5 year and annual assessments as a way to view changes over time.

Breathe New Life into your Stewardship Group

What are some steps you can take to rejuvenate your team? Every team has different issues, histories, and concerns. The following ideas might not fit your situation 100%, but should give you ideas on how to breath new life into the organization.

Prioritize Opportunities

No matter how perfect or idealistic your organization is, there is room to improve. There are always ways to improve how you manage your volunteers; how you select and train them; how you seek sponsorships; how you determine which trails need maintenance; how you communicate with your Agency partner; how you let your donors know what their contribution is doing; how to inform people of the importance of your beloved wilderness area; and so on.

Your team might come up with new ideas or new areas you can get involved with. Make sure you create the environment where people feel open to share their ideas. Make it a rule that ideas can't be rejected until you've looked at ways to make them work. The early rejection of even the worst idea will do you more harm than good – it communicates loudly that ideas will be rejected.

Steer ideas into areas of priority, though. Instead of saying “that's a bad idea” or “that won't work” ask instead “how will this idea help us meet our mission?”

Passing on ALL opportunities, without exploring how they might help your organization achieve your mission and goals, is a sign of stagnation. On the other hand, adding new functions and reaching further can revitalize your organization.

Disrupt the Status Quo

Do something different. In some respects it matters less WHAT you do different than that you are doing ANYTHING different. You've had the same people do the same things for so long that it is automatic. You need to disrupt the automation.

Obviously, some things need to be done a certain way for legal or contractual reasons, but you might find simply changing WHO does it will cause a ripple effect. Someone else will bring different perspectives, different experiences, and different ideas. At the very least you will now have someone else who knows how to do that particular task. We often assume something has to be done a certain way, simply because that's how it has always been done.

For instance, perhaps your Agency requires you to submit a report at the end of each year documenting your volunteer hours in a particular way (such as by season – Winter, Summer, etc.,) when it would be more convenient to provide the information differently (such as monthly or quarterly because you already generate such reports for other purposes). The same person has been preparing the report for the past eight years, collecting the information the same exact way. Train someone else to do the report. This simple change will bring several opportunities:

- The new person might have specific skills or knowledge that will provide insight into easier and more effective ways to collect the information.
- Another person trained to do the report may free up the person who has done it the past eight years to focus on another priority.
- Sometimes explaining why something is important reveals the reality that it might not be that important after all. Perhaps the Agency needed specific information because of a project that has long since been discontinued, but your organization continues to mindlessly spend the necessary man-hours each year to collect and process it.
- Avoid answering “why” with “because that’s just how we do it.” When you train someone the aspects of any task, you should understand why it is necessary, and why it is necessary to do it in the way you are doing it. For the Agency that requested volunteer hours by season, it may be that they selected season when asked how they wanted it broken down. They could have selected month or quarter just as easily. Or it may be necessary to provide it by season because of reporting requirements they have.

We've all encountered situations where someone asked why, and nobody knew the reason.

- A national publisher had a rule that customers' advertisements could not have double-quotation marks. This rule had been in place for two decades before someone asked the reason. Extensive research discovered that early versions of the font used by the publisher did not have the character. The font had been updated long ago, but the “rule” remained in place. Some of your “rules” are merely statements of conditions that no longer apply.
- A husband asked his wife why she always cut the roast in half before putting it in the oven. She didn't know – that's how her mother taught her. The couple asked the mother

why, and she didn't know either. Her mother had taught her as well. Together they visited the aging grandmother to discover she had to cut the roast in half to fit into her tiny oven. Some of your procedures are workarounds to overcome conditions that no longer exist.

Every day we are asked to make decisions. We like to think that every decision is important, but the fact is many aren't. Some decisions are simply the selection of one choice instead of another. Ask me how I'd like to see volunteer hours reported and I might not really care whether it is reported monthly, quarterly, or seasonally, so I pick one. If you are already collecting the information in a particular format for some other reason I could just as easily select that method. If it is important to be reported seasonally, have me explain why – so if the conditions dictating my reason change you can revisit the decision.

Be cautious when the only reason why you can think of is simply because that's how it has been done.

The Proverbial Bus

Take a long look at each and every member of your team. Imagine for a moment that they were run over by a bus and will not be able to do the job for a long time – if at all. How would that impact your organization? Who would do the work they do? How would they know how to do it? If your organization would not survive if a particular person were incapacitated, that should clearly tell you that your organization is extremely mortal. The wilderness your organization is devoted to should survive long after all of you are gone – that is why we are stewards. The work your organization does to benefit your wilderness should continue as well. The need will not die when the individuals in your stewardship move on, quit, or pass away.

If your organization resists planning for contingencies, keep pressing the question. Ask board members what they think would happen if a major donor were lost, or a key person left the organization.

We might think it morbid to explore what might happen when important people in the group pass on. But this is something that will occur whether we think about it or not. You and the people in your organization have dedicated much in the name of wilderness. We do it because we want wilderness to survive for future generations. We know we won't be here to see them enjoy what we work to preserve. The dedication and sacrifices we make deserve to matter in the long run, so thinking what might happen when we pass on will assure that our work will continue.

Expand your Core Competency

Often we think it is necessary to contract our program to respond to stagnation, regrowth, or decline. Consider doing the opposite. What is the single most successful part of your program?

Consider expanding that and adding more resources to it. If your stewardship organization excels at trail maintenance, for instance, but simply cannot get an interpretive program off the ground, consider focusing on the task you know well. Expanding an existing program can disrupt the status quo as much as contracting it can.

If it is something your organization does well, you likely have some organizational pride and institutional knowledge about it. People who like performing that task will be excited at the possibility of expanding it. You might be able to rejuvenate your team simply by doing more of what they do well, rather than trying to perform functions you don't have competency in.

Explore ways to gain competency through your existing area of strength. If you are trying to develop an interpretive program, as above, perhaps you can tie your trail maintenance strength into it – such as having your trail crew demonstrate to local groups how the trails are created (so they know why it is important to help preserve them – perhaps by donating to your stewardship organization).

Help Start a New Organization

Work with NWSA to help start new stewardship organizations. Sometimes the excitement of getting an organization off the ground can help you regain the excitement your organization had in its early days. It can help serve as a reminder of why your organization started in the first place.

Examine your Mission

What is your organization's purpose? Many organizations will create a Mission Statement to summarize this purpose. Do you have one? You likely created one when your stewardship group was founded. Does it accurately summarize your current purpose? Review this periodically to assure that the mission is still relevant and practical for your organization.

Your mission should be a short statement that summarizes the purpose of your organization. It should be short and sweet and easy to remember. It should be the statement that comes naturally when someone asks what your organization is all about.

Why do you exist? Which of these examples is most similar to your mission statement? Far too many mission statements read like the second example and should read like the first.

“To ensure the Bosco Wilderness retains its wilderness character for future generations”

“To strategize and implement processes and procedures that facilitate and expedite volunteerism in a manner that encourages and assists in the management of the Bosco Wilderness, as directed by administering agencies”

Examine your programs to make sure they help you achieve your mission. Say you have a fundraising campaign that sends kids to science camp. How does that help your mission? Science camp is beneficial, but how does that help the Bosco Wilderness retain its wilderness character? Modify programs that don't explicitly work towards your mission. You might require children who apply for the camp funds to write essays on why Bosco Wilderness is important. You might partner with the camp staff to assure that wilderness awareness is part of their program.

If the connection isn't explicit, make it so. If it can't be modified to meet the mission either modify the mission, drop the project, or find a more appropriate organization to turn the project over to.

When Steve Jobs returned to Apple in 1996 he cancelled many projects and products that had much support. The Apple Newton was a hand-held portable device that held huge potential, but which pulled resources and attention away from the company's core competency. Sometimes it is necessary to prune living parts of your organization in order to allow the organization as a whole to grow and thrive.

Plan to Succeed or Plan to Fail

Does your organization have short and long-term plans? Without plans, your organization will drift aimlessly and will generally react to circumstances, rather than controlling its own fate and destiny. If your organization is stagnant, it will remain so until you do something about it. If your organization isn't stagnant now, but you merely react to events instead of engineering them, you will become stagnant eventually.

Living things grow. Dying things weaken and fade. Make sure your stewardship group grows. If you don't have plans in place to lead your organization on the path of success, it will drift aimlessly down the path of failure.

What would happen if...

Identify events or situations that have a good likelihood of happening, and brainstorm steps your organization could do to benefit from them, avoid them, or cause them to happen.

What would happen if...

- Your Executive Director or President had to move out of state because of a spouse's job?
- You lost your top donor or funding source?
- Your Agency partner asked you to expand your program into a neighboring wilderness area?
- Your organization was sued because a former volunteer claims they were a victim of harassment?
- The local media contacted you and wanted to feature the work your organization does?
- Your wilderness area became part of a news story (due to a fire, a high profile crime, major legislation, etc.)?

- A bill was moving through Congress to reassign management of your wilderness area to a different Agency?
- 10% of your top volunteers decided not to renew agreements this year?
- A board member brought information about a grant that could increase your program funding by 15%?

Explore other situations that are likely to happen in your organization, and then brainstorm actions you can take.

For negative situations, explore ideas on how you can react to minimize the impact. But also examine steps you can put into place to avoid them altogether. What steps can you take to avoid losing your top donor, for instance?

For positive situations, explore ideas on how you can capitalize or expand the benefits. Likewise, examine steps you can put into place to cause these situations to happen. For example, will you find a grant if you aren't specifically looking for one?

Contingency Plans

All organizations should prepare plans to prepare for possible situations. Loss of leadership, loss of funding, and loss of Agency support should top the list.

Developing a contingency plan to replace crucial leadership roles will help your organization see the dangers of Founder's Syndrome, for example.

Throw in the Towel?

There may come a time when you face the reality that your organization simply cannot survive. Keep in mind that most organizations going through crisis or stagnation may *seem* as though they cannot survive, so this conclusion is one that must be made with long and hard deliberation.

If you reach the conclusion that dismantling your organization is the only option, make sure you understand the legal requirements you are obligated to follow. Your state's non-profit corporation laws and your organization's bylaws should spell out specifics on how the organization's assets are to be liquidated.

Some states will require that all assets must be donated to a relevant non-profit corporation, so don't assume you can just divide the shovels and other tools amongst the remaining staff.

If you are merging with another organization there may be legal requirements you need to follow as well. For instance, documentation might be needed on how the organization approved the action, such as the precise wording of a vote of the Board.

A lot of sacrifice went into the creation of your stewardship group. Make sure you take whatever steps are necessary to bring your group back to life before throwing in the towel. Those who have made the sacrifices – including you – deserve the efforts. Get help from all possible sources. Especially consider getting help from the network of wilderness stewards you are part of – the National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance. Other organizations may have encountered similar problems as you, and may be able to offer ideas, suggestions, and other assistance.

Conclusion: Phoenix Rising from the Ashes

Can a growing, vibrant organization emerge from one that has been experiencing years of decline and stagnation? Absolutely! In fact, your experience in rebuilding your organization will likely make you and the organization much stronger than it would be if it had never experienced a dark period. You have seen the edge of the abyss, and you can lead your organization away from it. You know what it feels like to consider dismantling the organization you are devoted to, and you know you are capable of steering the ship away from the rocky shore.

Acknowledgements

Jarome Wilson of the San Geronio Wilderness Association provided the overall outline and content for this Guide. “I became President of SGWA in the midst of a funding crisis,” Jarome says. “Many of the suggestions in the guide are from that experience – either things that worked or things I wish we had done in hindsight.”

Significant editorial contributions were made by Dave Cantrell.

Additional Resources

The National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance website has a number of resources for stewardship groups. Visit us at: www.wildernessalliance.org

Developing Successful Wilderness Stewardship Partnerships, research by Heather Day. She interviewed thirty Wilderness stewardship nonprofit and Agency staff and synthesizes the responses into three keys to successful partnerships.

<http://www.wildernessalliance.org/toolkit/working-with-agencies/142-developing-successful-wilderness-stewardship-partnerships>