

A Culture of Recruitment

by Kevin Dean, Kiwanis International Trustee



As a kid, I loved “Looney Tunes,” the series of Warner Brothers cartoons dominated by the antics of that “wascally wabbit” Bugs Bunny. I think the genius of these one-act plays was that the majority of the stories involved a classic struggle (and really cool gadgets and gizmos). Whether it was Bugs and Elmer Fudd, Bugs and Daffy Duck, Sylvester and Tweety, Foghorn Leghorn and Henery Hawk, Pepé Le Pew and Penelope, Ralph Wolf and Sam Sheepdog, or my personal favorite, Wile E. Coyote and the Roadrunner, we could relate to these characters because they were what they were. It was Bugs’ job to eat carrots, it was Elmer’s job to hunt Bugs, it was Henery’s job to try to eat Foghorn and the other chickens, it was Sylvester’s job to try to eat Tweety, and in a brilliant artistic flourish, it was part of the story line that Ralph Wolf and Sam Sheepdog actually were both working a job. They were friends outside of the “office,” but on duty Ralph schemed to capture sheep and Sam always thwarted his plans. These stories also evoke a simpler time: a time we think back on with nostalgia when there were no cell phones, no personal computers, no Internet, and three television channels.

And Kiwanis had more than 300,000 members.

As of September 30, 2012 our membership is, for the first time in decades, below 220,000 members. Not one district in North America grew in 2011-2012, and in the preceding years there have never been more than one or two which were able to grow. So how is it then that we can see our clubs aging, we can see our membership dwindling, we can see clubs closing, we can see districts literally evaporating before our eyes, we know that fewer members means diminished relevance and reduced ability to help those in need, we know intuitively that we are not on the path to recovery but on the path to oblivion, and yet year after year we watch our numbers continue to decline and can’t seem to fix it?

Have we been beaten into a sense of futility, or are we, like Wile E. Coyote, stubbornly continuing to execute the same, flawed, failed strategy over and over again, to the same end? We knew in watching these stories what the formula was going to be before it even started. Wile E. Coyote was going to order items from the ubiquitous Acme Corporation that would mysteriously arrive by post almost immediately, items he would always use to hatch an overly-complicated plan. He was always going to forget about the Law of Gravity. And he was always, always going to underestimate the Roadrunner’s simple straightforward approach. The Roadrunner wasn’t trying to maim, crush, blow up or otherwise kill Wile E., he was just trying to eat a little birdseed and go on about his business of darting around the desert. Wile E. always did it to himself. And meanwhile, we could knowingly chuckle at which horrible end he was going to meet today. Would it be the anvil or the safe previously launched in the air, a forgotten guided missile, or the inevitable fall from the cliff? Although the means and method of his comeuppance changed regularly, we knew that it was never going to end well for Wile E. Coyote, super genius.

Unfortunately, Wile E. Coyote also had the shortest memory in the animal kingdom. Not only was he totally inept in achieving his intended goal, with each new episode and each recovery from his terrible injuries, he was right back at it doing the same thing over and over, day after day, year after year, and achieving the same result, or from his point of view, not achieving it. Certainly he got points for being persistent. That appealed to us. But how many anvils on the head was it going to take before he figured out that his strategy wasn’t working?

The same is true with Kiwanis. Every year about this time we lament the state of our membership. We wring our hands and express grave concern about what happened “last year,” and then we take a soul-cleansing and slate-cleaning deep breath and go right on doing the same things, or not doing them, somehow expecting a different

result. It has to stop, or soon, it's going to be too late. So how do we change and once and for all begin the recovery?

The first step is to admit that we have to change. In "Julius Caesar," Cassius says to Brutus that "the fault...is not in our stars, but in ourselves." I think he meant don't blame luck, don't blame fate, don't blame sociological changes, don't blame the economy, don't blame the government, don't blame the people, but look within. Because in spending all of our time and energy in a search for a scapegoat, we avoid taking responsibility for our own situation. Accepting ownership at the individual club level of our membership position is certainly a crucial step on the road to recovery, but that alone ultimately will not solve our problem. Secondly, we have Kiwanis clubs with the best service projects, the best Service Leadership Program sponsorship, the most enjoyable club experience, and which are legitimately positively impacting their communities, yet they still lose members. Why? Because growth in Kiwanis in the 21st century will never ever be a function of something else. It must be an intentional outcome, its own goal. In short, to change our stars, we must develop, implement, and indoctrinate a Culture of Recruitment within each of our club members and member clubs.

What is a Culture of Recruitment? First and foremost, it is an active and dynamic strategy. I believe our historical recruitment strategy in Kiwanis may best be characterized as "passive arrogance." We say, "Sure, we'd love to have you as a member if you recognize our value and seek us out, but if we have to go out of our way to convince you to join, if you expect personal value for your membership experience, if you might change your mind about belonging to Kiwanis after a few years due to changes in your life or flaws in our club, then you obviously don't 'get' Kiwanis and if you don't get us, then we don't need you." Blunt, I know. And an over-dramatized version of the truth. But fundamentally, it's about right. Ironically, when Kiwanis began in 1915, every single member and every club was a part of a Culture of Recruitment. That's how we grew. We sold the Kiwanis Proposition to prospective members and citizens in neighboring communities, and it took off like wildfire. Somewhere along the way, however, we got complacent, and we allowed inertia to become the driving factor in our membership circumstances. Inertia is the tendency of any object to resist a change in its motion. If this doesn't describe the direction of membership growth in Kiwanis today, I don't know what does.

In North America, we lose about 2% of our membership to death every year. This is not anecdotal. If you review the records of District Conventions, you will see that this number is relatively consistent. However, we also bring in new members in significant numbers. You may be surprised to learn that we have added approximately 13% new members, gross, to our rolls in each of the past six years. That number has fluctuated very little during that period, from a high of 13.6% to a low of 12.6%. And in each of these six years, you may be further surprised to learn that our new members exceeded our cuts an average of nearly eight months out of twelve, sometimes as high as ten months out of a year. However, time and again, the month of September has wiped us out, seeing sometimes three to four times as many cuts as adds. Let's do the math on net losses to take this to its final conclusion. Over the past six years: 13% additions – 2% deaths – 13.9% attrition = 2.9% net loss, representing almost 41,000 net members over the same six-year period of time.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Kiwanis still has the best product to offer prospective members of all of our competitors. We know that every day we do have successes in both building new clubs as well as in getting members to join existing clubs, and that those new members can very quickly become integral to our clubs' success. We simply don't have enough of them coming in from either source to offset our attrition. It's easy to say, well, we have 218,000 members. If every 5th member just goes out and brings someone in now, we can replace those 41,000 members overnight! But we all know that it is not nearly that simple. We need a Culture of Recruitment. And this involves not only bringing members in, but also doing a better job of retaining them.

So how does establishing a Culture of Recruitment combat these numbers? A Culture of Recruitment includes:

- A multi-faceted recruitment strategy in which members often invite prospects to regular meetings or projects, clubs hold special membership recruitment meetings, and clubs reach out to groups for prospective

membership, such as Key Club members' parents, members of the Chamber of Commerce, employees of a particular business, etc.;

- Clubs use service and fundraising efforts also to recruit new members;
- Clubs regularly publicize their achievements in the community and always end by asking for more members;
- Members are familiar with the mechanics of membership, i.e., dues structures and fees, and are comfortable explaining them to prospective members;
- Members are confident in their own understanding of the Kiwanis Proposition, why they find personal value in membership, and can communicate that freely to others;
- Members are all conversant in the club's accomplishments and projects, both recent and long-term;
- Clubs participate in The Eliminate Project at some level and can explain its relevance;
- Clubs sponsor at least one Kiwanis Service Leadership Program and participate in at least one Kiwanis branded program or project;
- Clubs provide induction and orientation to each new member in a timely fashion;
- Clubs always have recruitment materials on hand such as a club brochure and the "Join the Club" membership application.
- Clubs promote involvement in projects and fundraisers by as many members as possible, and provide a good variety of options and opportunities for the members, but do not shun those who do not or cannot participate;
- Clubs reach out to those members who haven't been seen or heard from in a while;
- Clubs actively manage their rosters, cut people when relevant, and add members as soon as they have joined;
- Clubs encourage participation in district and international events and attend them, as well as divisional commitments and other clubs' special events, whenever possible;
- Clubs invoice members well in advance of the year-end date of September 30 so that they know in enough time who is going to pay and who is not; and
- As a result of this knowledge, clubs take responsibility for actively recruiting to ensure that they do not allow the month of September to result in membership cuts.

I want to amplify briefly on the last point. Not every club is going to be good at all of the points on this list, but the last point is critical. Clubs succeeding in many of the preceding items will likely have mitigated their risk associated with a "September massacre." However, a club which fully embraces a Culture of Recruitment will do everything possible to ensure that it does not lose members in September, at a time when there is no opportunity to recover them. Some say that September 30 is just a date, but that is not true. Because of the nature of Kiwanis and our leadership structure, we have a tendency to put what happened prior to September 30 behind us and think only ahead. If we lose members every September, we allow clubs to do so with impunity, and then we simply "move on," we are doing nothing to combat the very circumstance we can clearly see is the most destructive to our future. But clubs that plan ahead will begin thinking about September 30 months in advance, and will do whatever they can in order to mitigate those losses.

They will try while there is still time to convince questionable members to recommit to the club. They will have replaced or plan to replace those who they have lost to death, relocation, or who they know have already resigned their membership. They will plan a September membership push to offset the inevitable unexpected losses. They understand that every single member matters, that we have lost 100,000 members in the past twenty years one individual member at a time, and that is the way we are going to have to recover them. If a small club of fifteen members remains at fifteen in September by recruiting and replacing two members rather than dropping to thirteen, they did not stay the same. Rather than losing 13% of their membership, which would have added significantly to the problem, they worked to maintain their numbers, brought in new members, and became a part of the solution – a solution which we need to replicate 8,000 times in every club all over the world, each and every year.

The Carolinas District has lost 3,648 members since September 30, 2003, representing more than 35% of its membership during the past nine years. Thirty-four clubs have either voluntarily surrendered their Charters or had their Charters revoked during the past three years, representing 334 members, while only four new clubs have been built during the same period of time. The last time the Carolinas District posted positive net growth was in

the 2005-2006 administrative year. Though the district has continued to add members on a regular basis, it has fallen significantly below the Kiwanis average for new members, averaging only approximately 11% each year, while the percentage of member cuts is fairly equal to the average. This ratio is consistent with the numbers of clubs lost vs. built, cited above. Further, the district's member losses outnumber its increases in 7.5 out of each twelve months during this same period of time, which is nearly the inverse of the Kiwanis average. And consistent with most districts, September regularly results in two to three times as many member cuts as adds. It is important to understand and accept these numbers, not from the standpoint of fault or blame, but to place into perspective the scope and scale of the challenge that has developed since 2003, especially. This is where we have come from. But what matters now is where we go from here.

Governor Tom Carrier has put into place an ambitious and aggressive plan to build nine new clubs during 2012-2013. Clearly this will not be easy, but I have pledged my support to help to build at least one of them myself, and I have built six in the past three years. A team has been assembled, sites are being evaluated, and a comprehensive timeline is being crafted. I applaud this effort because it trumpets a clear and definite intention to grow, and I encourage all members involved, from sponsoring clubs to recruiters to division and regional officers to do their very best to ensure that this goal is met. Clearly, achieving this goal will help to significantly improve the percentage of member adds, although depending on the numbers of clubs lost during the year or the attrition rate, it may not solve all of our problems. In order to ensure that we move the Carolinas District back on a permanent road to recovering the members lost since 2003, each club needs to continue to embrace this concept and to further develop, enhance, and strengthen its Culture of Recruitment, until the day when, like the Kiwanians of 1915, recruiting new members is so engrained within each of our clubs, that it becomes a reliable natural effect of everything else that we do on a regular basis.

In conclusion, although the stories wouldn't have been nearly as entertaining, just once I'd have liked to have seen Wile E. Coyote catch that Roadrunner. When a firm and strong Culture of Recruitment exists within the majority of our clubs, we will not have to struggle to grow, but growth will happen as a matter of course. Let us all commit to making 2012-2013 the year when we recognize that more of our clubs must begin to grow in order to once again sustain the promise that the Objects of Kiwanis represent. When we have achieved that goal, then that Roadrunner is really in for it.

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