



Society Strategies

Federation of Genealogical Societies

P.O. Box 200940 Austin TX 78720-0940

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Set I Strategies for Societies

The Society in Crisis!

by Dawne Slater-Putt, CG

Supplemental Page

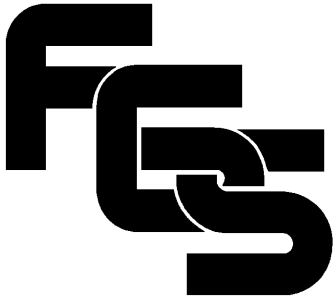
This strategy paper, written some years ago, is an FGS *Classic* that contains ideas and strategies still relevant today in society management.

This paper discusses how a society can prepare for the worst. Legal entanglements, member mischief, or political strife and infighting can be addressed, even prevented, with preparation.

The information on page 4 which directs the interested person on how to obtain copies of this paper is incorrect. The FGS office no longer reprints the SSS papers, and has phased out paper copies of the SSS papers altogether.

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INTRODUCTION

Crises that strike genealogical organizations are varied. They can be:

- Legal actions
- Lack of interest by members
- Not enough “key players” to perform the major work of the society
- Disregard for the society’s bylaws
- Schism among members
- Despotism of leaders
- Loss of meeting site

STRATEGIES

Whatever the society’s problem, some basic strategies are the same:

Know Your Society’s Bylaws

Sometimes the crisis is that the officers and board are acting in violation of the society’s bylaws. The parliamentarian should point out the digressions to the organizations’ leaders. If they do not correct their action, the membership should be informed and further action taken.

Act in a Professional Manner

A genealogical society usually is a not-for-profit group that meets casually, and typically is managed by a volunteer board of directors. However, this does not mean that officers and board members should act unprofessionally. Especially in a crisis situation, it is important to act in a manner governed by logic and not emotion. Discourteous behavior will only worsen the situation. It is particularly important to act professionally when outsiders are involved, such as in a court case, or when talking to the media.

Get Good Advice

In the case of legal crises, this means retaining the services of an attorney. Although suits against genealogical societies are relatively rare, they **do** occur. Some “hot spots” are society publications (targets of libel actions); and educational events, where accidents may occur or discrimination be perceived.

The society should consider insurance for the society and its board members **before** a legal crisis occurs. This will help protect individuals from being personally punished in the event of a legal decision against the organization. The Federation of Genealogical Societies can help

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societies obtain insurance. Those who are interested can contact the FGS office.

Sometimes it makes sense to seek the advice of an expert in the area of crisis. Examples include professional fund-raisers, treasurers for commercial businesses, secretaries, and time management professionals. An accountant specializing in not-for-profit organizations should be consulted in the event of serious financial problems or audits by the Internal Revenue Service.

Getting the advice of business professionals, attorneys or accountants may cost the society money, but these are dollars well spent.

In non-legal situations, consider the experiences of other societies. Consult societies in your area or attend the Open Forum at the Federation of Genealogical Societies national conference for a national perspective. Hear how others have avoided or solved similar problems. The strategies that have worked for them might be successfully adapted for your organization.

Delegate Responsibilities

Assigning work may be hard for busy, responsible people, but **not** doing this can cause trouble! When tasks are not divided and delegated, a very small number of the same people continue to do all of the work. This leads to frustration, particularly if unexpected vacancies occur on the board or in other key roles.

Another danger is that long-term management by a small group can result in too much “ownership” in positions. The faithful few may resist allowing new people into leadership roles in “their” organization. This can happen when people invest so much time and energy that the society becomes part of their self-image.

Cultivate volunteers **before** the society gets into a crisis situation. Discourage no one. Find work for everyone. Remember, the society belongs to **all** members.

Communicate!

Do not try to hide a significant crisis from the membership. Minor problems may be kept transparent. Major problems that directly affect members or their benefits require disclosure.

Most bylaws identify member benefits, such as a quarterly publication. If six months go by without one, members may wonder what their dues pay for. They also may reconsider renewing their membership. Instead of silently skipping an issue, a society whose editor has resigned might consider sending postcards explaining the situation.

Such a communication can have added positive effects – someone may be able to offer a solution or volunteer to help!

Ask for Help!

Don't hesitate to ask members for help. Use the society's periodical and the podium at meetings to describe the problem and let members know how they can help the society.

Many people are hesitant to volunteer. Board members should personally approach members whose talents would be an asset to the society. If the individual declines, he or she may recommend someone else. Follow up on leads!

Besides helping to solve a crisis, bringing “new blood” into the ring of leaders reaps an additional benefit. Newcomers often bring renewed excitement and enthusiasm to the society's leadership.

Solve Problems as Quickly as Possible

One problem leads to another. Rather than ignore a problem and allow it to grow into a major crisis, or to develop into several problems, try to solve it as soon as it arises. Call a conference, whether in person or by telephone or e-mail with the pertinent parties. Discover the facts. Gather information. Brainstorm solutions. Set goals and report back.

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Shift the Paradigms of the Society

Bylaws should work **for** and not **against** the society. If it becomes impossible to publish the six issues of the newsletter specified by the bylaws, perhaps the bylaws need to be changed.

The tricky part is shifting the society's paradigm in mid-membership year. Again, it is wise to be honest. If members paid dues believing they would get six newsletters and they are abruptly informed – or not informed at all – that they will receive only three, some may feel slighted. To maintain good will, explain the problem and the proposed change.

Bylaws changes reflecting the society's new profile should be made. To avoid future problems, make bylaws non-specific as to number of publications. "The Society will publish a periodical, whose frequency is to be determined by the board of directors," is one solution.

WHEN "ENOUGH IS ENOUGH"

As leaders of a society in crisis, do what you can do, but stop short of sacrificing your own family, health, and career. Those who are active in a society have a stake in its future. When the society is in crisis, it is natural to want to do anything to "fix" it, from giving more and more time to do all of the jobs that need doing, to lying awake at night worrying about the organization.

But sometimes this desire to keep a society going at its former pace can be a strain on the individuals involved. In the extreme, it can cause a breach in the family, problems on the job, and even affect an individual's health. It is important to remember that although a genealogical society is a worthwhile organization, it is **just** an organization.

Know When it is Time to Say "Enough"

Most societies wax and wane in the level of their activity, including publishing, hosting workshops, and completing projects. Their membership numbers rise and fall. Much of this depends on the

dynamics of the current board of directors. However, there comes a time in the life of some societies when keeping the organization alive no longer makes sense.

Some questions to discuss might be:

- Has the society outlived its usefulness?
- Are there enough interested individuals to keep the society viable?
- Are there enough individuals who are willing to do the work required to keep the society functioning?
- Is another society in the area filling the needs that this society once filled?

Alternatives exist to dissolving the society all together. It may be possible to merge with another area society. This spreads the work to be done among a larger constituency.

HAVE A PLAN

Before the next crisis strikes, officers and members of the board of directors should work on a "disaster plan." Not every contingency can be anticipated, but the types of crises, as noted at the beginning of this paper, can be addressed and possible actions in the event of their occurrence can be planned. A society is stronger in a crisis when it can **act** instead of **react**. Some ideas:

- Suggest strongly that officers and other members of the board of directors study the bylaws and remain familiar with them.
- Have the names of an attorney, an accountant who specializes in not-for-profit organizations, and other experts on file.
- Cultivate members who are too busy to become actively involved now, but who could be strong officers and committee chairs in the future. Give them less time-consuming jobs to do now to keep them actively involved in the society. This will

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- be the society's "back-up" team: in training as the next generation of officers.
- Formulate a plan to market the society should its membership numbers begin to fall, and be open to changing objectives if they are not meeting the needs and desires of potential members.
 - Encourage respectful and courteous behavior at all times between board members, even when disagreements arise.

CONCLUSION

As innocuous as an organization like a genealogical society may seem, they are not immune to problems. These may take the form of political strife and infighting, the apathy of formerly enthusiastic members, resignation of leaders, legal actions, and countless other crises.

These situations are painful to experience, but can be overcome. When the society survives, it may emerge from the crisis stronger, with leaders that are less complacent and more aware, and who have a plan for handling similar problems that may arise in the future.

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