

Are You Ready To Lead?

Being an effective parent group leader requires a commitment to the big picture and a willingness to let others help achieve those goals.

by Craig Bystrynski



Pinpointing the traits that make a good leader can be difficult. Search the Internet for common leadership characteristics and you'll find lots of lists: persistence, determination, honesty, intelligence. Motivator, trainer, communicator. Courageous, imaginative, forward-looking. And so on. But nobody embodies all of those traits, and you don't have to be Winston Churchill to be a good leader.

The first step toward being an effective parent group leader is to recognize and accept your leadership role. "Parent group president" isn't just a job. It isn't simply a series of tasks that you do for a set period of time until someone else takes over. It's also a leadership role. People will look to you for direction. They'll look to you to set the tone for the group. And they'll look to you to set goals and expectations. It's human nature; people take cues, both subtle and overt, from the leader. By the nature of your job title, that's you.

It's easy to get lost in the day-to-day chores of the office. You have a million things to do, from meeting with the principal to checking on the fundraiser to finding volunteers to greet new families at open house. That's why it's so important not to fall victim to the "It's easier just to do it myself" syndrome.

There's a lot to do to run a parent group. If you're the one who's deciding what brand of hot dogs to buy for the cookout and how many of each size shirt to order for the spiritwear sale, something has to give. Almost 100 percent of the time, that something involves the big-picture items that are crucial to effective leadership.

What would you like your group to accomplish, and how will you get there? How would you like your group to be perceived by others? What are the priorities for the group? Questions like these are important. The time and effort you devote to them will determine how much control you have over them. And your effectiveness in answering them will largely determine your group's overall success.

To be a good leader, you don't have to be charismatic, you don't have to be a great motivator or trainer, and you don't have to be a great salesman. But you do have to be an active leader, not a passive one. So accept and embrace the role. You might be surprised at the difference you can make. ■

Rate Your Leadership Skills

Take the quiz to see what your strengths are as a leader and determine which skills could use some work.

For each question below, select which action you're most likely to take in the given situation. Add up the points, then check your score at the bottom.

1. It's a week before the big fall festival and the committee cochairs tell you they have everything under control. You:

- a. Feel lucky to have such capable leaders in charge and are relieved you don't have to do it all yourself. (2)
- b. Ask them whether they remembered to use the event checklist. (1)
- c. Would never delegate such an important task. (-1)

2. The principal tells you that reports of bullying have skyrocketed this year. You:

- a. Think it's none of your business until your own child is bullied. (-1)
- b. Research how other schools have addressed the issue and bring ideas to the group. (2)
- c. Plan a town meeting for parents on the subject. (1)

3. Last year, you served as treasurer. When you hand over the records to your successor, you give her:

- a. A perfectly organized notebook and a flash drive with the budget spreadsheets. (2)
- b. A jumble of papers she will be lucky to make heads or tails of. (1)
- c. An apology. You're still trying to find where you put that box of receipts. (-1)

4. At a board meeting, officers cannot agree about which cookie dough company to use for a fundraiser. You:

- a. Make the decision yourself. (0)
- b. Ask the fundraising chair to share the pros and cons of each vendor with the board. (2)
- c. Tell the fundraising committee to figure it out on its own. (1)

5. A parent complains that the PTO is always asking for money. Your first instinct is to:

- a. Show them the door. (-1)
- b. Ask for their input on what the group should do differently. (2)
- c. Vow to provide more tangible benefits to families. (1)

6. The parent group has raised all the money it needs for new playground equipment. You:

- a. Decide the group should buy the biggest climbing wall there is. It's your son's favorite. (-1)
- b. Form a subcommittee to research products, vendors, and safety requirements. (2)
- c. Put off the decision on how to proceed until next fall, when someone else takes office. It's just so much trouble. (1)

<Rate Your Leadership Skills>

7. A neighboring elementary school closed and the students were transferred to your child's school. You:

- a. Plan to give them a warm welcome at school registration. (2)
- b. Ask the room parents to give them a call and invite them to the next parent group activity. (1)
- c. Think if they just read the parent group newsletter, they'll know what's going on. (-1)

8. You've heard that a parent is willing to take charge of organizing family night. She has planned great events in the past, but you're mad at her because she voted for someone else to hold your office. You:

- a. Set aside your differences and ask for her help. (2)
- b. Ask her to organize family night, but make sure she does it exactly the way you want. That'll show her! (0)
- c. Tell her you already have enough help. (-1)

9. There aren't enough volunteers to supervise games at family night. You:

- a. Send a scathing email. Guilt is always a good motivator. (-1)
- b. Take an informal poll to find out why more people aren't volunteering. (1)
- c. Call a few well-respected parents with leadership potential and ask them to get on board—and bring their friends, too. (2)

10. During a meeting, a small but vocal group of parents harshly criticizes your idea for a new project. You:

- a. Get steaming mad and lose your cool. (-1)
- b. Know they have valid concerns but can't help but have hurt feelings. (1)
- c. Think about how the new project could be improved and address their concerns. (2)

11. In your opinion, the best thing about being a parent group leader is:

- a. Feeling like you're really making a contribution to the school. (2)
- b. Developing friendships with other parents. (1)
- c. Feeling like a VIP. (0)

12. The membership coordinator wants to run the membership drive completely differently this year based on what he learned at a workshop. You:

- a. Cringe and want to avoid change at all costs. (-1)
- b. Commend him for his initiative and ask what support he needs from the group. (2)
- c. Say it's a great idea and promptly begin telling him how it should be done. (0)

13. How would you rate your listening skills during long meetings?

- a. I practice active listening. It's important that people know I care about their points of view. (2)
- b. I'm a pretty good listener, but sometimes I zone out. (1)
- c. What did you say? (-1)

14. How would you describe your parent group?

- a. We have a common vision, and everything we do supports it. (2)
- b. We have not identified a concrete goal. We're too busy to think about things like that. (1)
- c. Our goal is to keep doing things the way we've always done them. (0)

15. If given the choice, you prefer to work:

- a. Solo. Involving others just slows down the process. (0)
- b. With a team. You can achieve more together than separately. (2)
- c. Never. You'd prefer someone else did the work. (-1)

Scoring

Total possible points: 30

21-30: Head of the Class. You put a lot of thought into your actions and have many traits of a good leader. As long as you keep an open mind and value the contributions of others, nothing can stop you!

11-20: Rising Star. You have learned much about leadership and are starting to feel comfortable in your role as a leader. To become even more effective, look at your lower-scoring questions and find ways to improve in those areas.

0-10: In Training. Your intentions are good, but some of your behaviors are keeping you from reaching your full potential. Look for leadership training in your area and seek support from other leaders. Be sure to communicate clearly, and remember not to take things personally. ■

17 Dos and Don'ts for Presidents

Get off to a fast start and keep the momentum going all year long with our list of essential dos and don'ts for leaders.

by Christy Forhan

- 1.** Do learn people's names, and use them often.
Don't assume everyone knows who you are. Introduce yourself.
- 2.** Do respect the principal's role as CEO of the school.
Don't surrender the PTO's authority to the principal. Work together as partners.
- 3.** Do get to know the school secretaries, custodians, and other support staff.
Don't treat them like the PTO's hired help. They work for the school and your kids; they aren't there to do your PTO grunt work. Treat them with respect, and they can help the PTO in many ways.
- 4.** Do set a good example by following school policies.
Don't park illegally just because you know you'll be in and out of the school quickly. Always sign in and wear the proper visitor badge even if everyone knows who you are. Follow protocol when you use the photocopier.
- 5.** Don't reinvent the wheel.
Do learn from the past. Share the old project binders. Talk to previous PTO leaders. Talk to teachers who have been on staff for a while.



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- 6. Don't disregard the knowledge of your past president.**
Do approach her as your mentor. Better than anyone, she knows the challenges you face. Listen to what she says. Ask for advice.
- 7. Do train your committee chairs and lay out expectations for each committee.**
Don't micromanage the committees or your fellow officers. Let them apply their time and talents, even if it means they don't do things exactly the way you would have done it yourself.
- 8. Don't put all the emphasis on fundraising.**
Do focus on parent involvement first. A community that feels connected to the school will step up to support the fundraisers when asked.
- 9. Do repeat longstanding, successful events.**
Don't ignore the value of tradition; it gives your PTO an identity in the community.
- 10. Do run efficient meetings.**
Don't treat people's time carelessly. Use an agenda, prepare minutes, start and end on time. Clean up after yourself. Listen to the members.
- 11. Do familiarize yourself with Robert's Rules of Order.**
Don't get bogged down in layers and layers of parliamentary procedure. Use it to keep your meetings running efficiently, not to overwhelm your members.
- 12. Do read your PTO's bylaws.**
Don't give up if there are no bylaws—creating them can be one of the most important things you do for your PTO.
- 13. Do become familiar with your PTO's formal organizational status.**
Don't assume everything is in order simply because your group has been around for years. Find out whether your PTO has a tax ID number (EIN, or employer identification number, in IRS-speak), whether you're incorporated with the state, and whether you're registered as a tax-exempt charity with the IRS under section 501(c)(3) of the federal tax code.
- 14. Do seek out information.** Reach out to PTO leaders at nearby schools to share experiences. Attend parent group conferences and expos. Visit the message boards at ptotoday.com.
Don't assume you know it all. There are loads of PTOs with great ideas and experiences you can use for your group.
- 15. Don't be afraid to make the tough decisions.**
Do accept responsibility for unpopular but wise decisions, such as canceling an event because of a lack of volunteer support.
- 16. Do say thanks.**
Don't lump every "thank you" into one blanket statement at year's end. Work hard throughout the year to thank individuals by name for their contributions to the PTO.
- 17. Don't let the stress level get too high.** It's OK to scale back to avoid burnout, and it's OK to hold purely social events to boost morale and teamwork.
Do have fun. Being a PTO leader can be a very rewarding experience. Even small steps to create a supportive community really make a difference for schools. ■

Build Support for New Ideas

When members resist change, reduce the chance of conflict with patience and understanding.

by Darylen Cote

Picture this: You're the new PTO president, and you have a brand-new leadership team with only one returning officer, the secretary. You attended a PTO Today Expo this past spring and have come home with wonderful new ideas and energy for a terrific year. You feel more dedicated to the mission of your organization than ever!

Now comes the hard part. How do you get the members of your group to buy in to new ideas and new ways? They seem wedded to the old! How can you share your energy and enthusiasm without creating hard feelings? Will entrenched attitudes stop you? Your chances of success are better if you move with care.

First, it's important to understand where resistance to change originates. Many group members might not want to lose something they perceive as valuable. Say the group puts a lot of effort into a fundraiser that brings only a small return. Maybe it was originated by a beloved former leader. In that case, ditching the fundraiser might seem disrespectful and like a further loss of that leader. Perhaps the fundraiser was a comfortable way for people to assume some responsibility without too much effort. The loss may involve pride in what they did.

Sometimes the change being proposed is simply misunderstood or doesn't make sense for this particular parent group. In the book *The Fundamentals of Change*, authors Kathleen Morris and Charles Raben state that if your members believe that the



change “violates an important principle or commitment that the organization must stand by,” your work in persuading acceptance of change will need to include a connection to the mission of your group. Add the well-documented fact that most of us possess a low tolerance for change in our lives and the uncertainty that accompanies it, and the source of resistance to our new ideas becomes apparent.

So what kinds of circumstances foster acceptance of a change? Helping members understand what will be gained creates a great foundation for moving forward. Perhaps the gain will be more money with less time and effort. Or increased feelings of achievement and the resulting enthusiasm that attracts new members. The gain might be evident in the new light in which the group will be viewed (status and prestige) if the change is successful.

Change Is Good?

Members always welcome change more openly when they have a sense of ownership for the decisionmaking process that leads to the change. Sometimes, including the whole membership in the decision stage is possible; sometimes it is not. What usually

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is possible is for members to be included in how your working committee will implement the change. Reassure members that change does not imply criticism of past practices; in fact, honoring the past helps people manage change.

The following list of specific techniques may help with overcoming resistance to new ways of doing things. They are based on an article by the Rev. Charles Am titled “The Fine Art of Change.”

Propose the change as a means of getting to an already accepted goal. Use your mission statement to support the need for the change. If you don’t have a mission statement, take the time to develop one before you try to introduce anything new.

For example, let’s say that one of the goals of your group is to promote improved literacy within the families of your district. In the past, you’ve sponsored a bake sale to buy books for the library. But you recently learned about research showing the connection between reading in the home and overall literacy.

What seems to make more sense to you, based on that information, is to sponsor a book fair that provides books to families at dramatically discounted prices. Both the book fair and the bake sale contribute to the overall goal, and baking and selling cookies might seem easier than organizing a book fair. Your best strategy in this case is to show how much more closely your new idea is related to the goal, extending the idea of reading beyond the library and into families.

Present innovations as extras, not as substitutes for the familiar. Even the most dedicated parent group members fear loss. In our example, the loss might be the camaraderie involved in baking together or the status of making the most popular cookie at the sale from an old family recipe. Is there energy in your group to do both activities? Or can your bake sale be directed toward meeting other goals? Am suggests that you’ll have more freedom to try new things if you protect as much of the old as possible.

Use short-term experiments rather than asking for long-term commitment. This relatively simple idea can satisfy both the need for a change and the need to protect favorite oldies. A trial or “pilot” provides for a review of the benefits and drawbacks of an innovation after an initial, fixed period of time. If the new idea meets the mission, was fun, and involved people meaningfully, it can be adopted for the long term. If it doesn’t work out,

it can be dumped without a huge loss of dignity or reputation for the leadership.

Welcome everyone’s input. Your members are more likely to buy in when their ideas become part of the plan. The plan itself generally grows stronger when you use a collaborative process in its development. In our example, you could ask specifically for people’s ideas about such issues as the timing of the fair, the location, what kinds of displays would be most effective, and how to publicize it to families. The list of issues that can benefit from input is almost endless with such a project.

Create a thirst for something new. Remind people that continuing to do things in the same way will most likely yield the same results. Results are unlikely to improve, and you won’t move closer to realizing the big dream. For example, if you can tap into the energy of the dream that created the desire for higher levels of literacy for families in the district, people may more easily feel the hope that trying something new can generate.

Begin with the leadership. Explain your idea first to your core group of officers and other leaders. Collaborating with your committed workers first, then sharing with the larger group, can build a network of people who already support the change. They have their own personal sphere of influence with the group. This kind of informal networking uses the avenues of influence that already exist to create acceptance for a change. If your key people agree with your new idea about the book fair, they’ll help their friends see the wisdom of increasing access to books in the home. Your job of persuasion will be made that much easier.

Andy Warhol once said, “They say that time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself.” Most leaders appreciate the fact that to grow and improve, change is necessary. That doesn’t make it easy. Activist Saul Alinsky expressed that difficulty this way: “Change means movement. Movement means friction.” Only in an abstract (nonexistent) world, a world where friction doesn’t exist, can movement or change occur “without that abrasive friction of conflict.” With some preparation and thought, the steps of implementing new ideas may not become free of conflict, but the process will certainly become more manageable. ■

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Top 10 Things You Should Know About Robert's Rules of Order

Bylaws:

A written document that defines the purpose of your group, its organizational structure, and the rules that govern the group. Bylaws should be customized for your group, published, and reviewed annually for revisions.

Amendments:

Formal changes to your bylaws.

Agenda:

A written list of items that will be covered during a meeting.

Minutes:

The written record of all business transacted at a meeting. Minutes should be kept for both executive board meetings and general PTO meetings.

Motion:

A formal proposal that the group take some specific action. Motions are voted on by the group. An idea at a meeting will often result in the presentation of a motion. A motion is the way to resolve a dispute, debate, disagreement, or open issue. Any member in good standing can present a motion to the group. A motion can be tabled if the group needs more time before voting on the motion. Tabled a motion suspends consideration until the group's next formal meeting.

Seconding:

When a member presents a motion, her idea must be supported by another member. The supporting member "seconds" the motion to indicate her support. After a motion is seconded, it should be discussed by the group. A motion cannot be voted on unless it is seconded.

Adjournment:

A formal motion to end a meeting. At the appropriate time, a member moves to adjourn, another member seconds, and the rest of the members voice their agreement. The secretary records the adjournment time in the minutes.

Quorum:

The minimum number of members that are required to conduct business at a PTO meeting. Quorum is specified in a PTO's bylaws.

Officers and Elections:

The bylaws should specify the elected officers of the PTO, their main duties, their terms of office, and the procedures by which they are nominated and elected.

Robert's Rules of Order:

Originally written by General Henry M. Robert in 1876, it is the most common form of parliamentary procedure in the United States. It was designed to keep business moving, protect the rights of members, and ensure polite behavior in organizations. A PTO's bylaws should specify that Robert's Rules of Order is the group's parliamentary authority. The complete version of RRO is hundreds of pages and covers every conceivable situation for the most complex organization. Many simplified versions have been published. Every PTO president should own at least one simplified version of Robert's Rules.