

What's wrong with American Legion membership???

By Chris Hoffman, Commander District 14

Since I have been a member of The American Legion (25 years now), I have regularly heard about how hard it is to retain/renew our members. I also hear the common issue of “Why do our new members come once and then never return?”.

Through observation and experience, I have noted trends that provide answers to both issues. There are truly simple answers to these concerns, if only we would stop and look, observe, if you will, as we gather with the members of our groups or organizations.

While it is said that “10% of a group do 100% of the work”, I believe that we are better than that.

What can we do to increase or improve upon that statistic? Let's take a look at some items that might provide answers to these thoughts as they relate to The American Legion.

WHAT'S YOUR WHY?

First, let's look at the reason or reasons that one might have decided to become a member of The American Legion. This is simply answered if we ask ourselves and our membership “What's your why?”

Why did one join The American Legion in the first place?

For me, it was because I wanted to serve other veterans by giving back what I felt was given me. I was represented by a group, The American Legion, by being the world's largest veteran service organization, congressionally chartered, to protect, advance and improve the benefits I earned as a veteran but also to improve the quality of life for myself, my family and my community. I WANTED to be a part of that team. That meant that I would get *INVOLVED*. In leadership, in the programs, in my community by supporting whatever efforts were needed to keep the organization current, relevant and moving into the future.

With that said, we must continue to ask why we joined The American Legion. We should regularly ask our members the same question just to help them remember and remind them that their participation and involvement is needed and encouraged to be a successful, cohesive and productive group that serves our community and its veteran population.

Ask yourself, your members, your leaders- “Is our post doing the things that made me want to join it?” “Are we still doing the programs, events and functions that made us want to be a part of it?”

MEMBER ENGAGEMENT

Are we engaging our membership in such a way that they are regularly reminded of what our post is doing? Member engagement is a crucial part of member participation and attendance. Why would anyone pay annual dues to do nothing each and every month? Why would anyone pay dues to be ignored or forgotten? While there are those who pay just to be a part of the “voice” that speaks to congress, we still have an obligation to stay connected, in touch, with our valuable and valued “active” members.

Think about this. There are as many as 31 days in a month. Our meetings are once a month for just a couple of hours. We have jobs, families, appointments and life in general. Without reminders, our mission gets forgotten. By using emails, texts, newsletters, social media, we can connect and remind our members of our meetings, events, programs and needs. The American Legion has a program called “Buddy Checks”. This is a great way to stay engaged with our members. At one post, a team of dedicated members performed over 1250 buddy calls in a 9 month period. The result? An increase in attendance at meetings, a significant increase in membership retention (from a regular 80% of the set goal, to above 100%), and an increase in the volunteer pool. Continuing to remind our members that we care about them, that they are valued, important and needed will keep them interested and they will want to continue to be a part of something that realizes that they are more than a number, more than a name on a piece of paper (roster) and more than someone who provides \$\$\$ to our causes.

Remind them that we have service officers. Remind them that we can provide resources that can help them when they need them. Stay connected and engage EVERY member as often as you can. If you are involved with them, they will be involved with you.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

We should follow membership engagement with community engagement. What valuable resources are available in your community that could provide publicity and awareness of your organization and the services you have to offer? How about your local Chamber of Commerce? By paying an annual fee in most cases, an organization could get their name on their social media site, listed in their directory and get notified of community events that might prove beneficial to recruiting potential members. Some community newspapers will provide free space to place notices regarding your upcoming or regular meetings and events. Local television and radio stations often have time available for public service announcements (PSA’s).

Let your surrounding communities know that you are serving your community and its veterans with programs that can provide opportunities for volunteering from helpful organizations (VFW, Blue Star Moms, Elks, etc.) that can create a sense of “mutual helpfulness”.

LEGION PROGRAMS

Are The American Legion programs our post has chosen to be involved in, being handled and performed effectively? Programs such as Boys and Girls State, Oratorical Competition, American Legion Baseball, Flag Education, etc. are valuable tools to our members as well as our community. Imagine the impact that getting into our schools might have by providing scholarship information and opportunities to our youth. With the proper information given to the school administrators and counselors, they can pass down the opportunity for “Free” (scholarship) money to interested students. Think about how we could impact our youth with flag education and etiquette programs. What could our community see about us by forming a competitive baseball team that just might compete for a national championship?

We need these programs to infuse our posts and communities with energy and pride and respect for the veterans that continue to serve AFTER their service commitment.

HOW WE RESPOND TO THE “YOUNGER” MEMBERS.

This is a huge issue. I have heard it at almost every post I have ever visited. “Why do new members come once and then we never see them again?”

The most obvious answer that I observe is that, once they have signed up and paid their initial dues, they are ignored!

So many times, I have noticed that there isn’t any form of recognition for them. There is not an initiation ceremony. They are not welcomed or noticed by members in attendance. And they are left to fend for themselves. There is no attempt to welcome, mentor, train or assign someone to help them acclimate to your group. They do not feel valued, important, needed, included or noticed from the start. They feel as if they are nothing more than a donor, a shadow, a non-entity.

When we do recognize their membership, we then immediately say “Have we got a job for you!”

In both cases, they will run like scared rabbits. You will, most likely, never hear from them again.

Why are we not providing them with a mentor? A person they can relate with who will help them acclimate and learn about your group, your organization and its programs, services and needs.

We should allow them time to discover how they fit in to your post. Allow time to provide them with information and have someone guide them through some training (start with The American Legion Basic Training).

As they become familiar with your group, take time to assess their strengths and weaknesses. See how they might fit into a role of future leadership or how they could

provide value and energy with new and fresh ideas that benefit or upgrade your programs and post.

Once they do find their place and you assess their qualities, ASK them if they might be interested in whatever it is. Once you have ASKED, then they have the choice to accept or decline. If they decline, move on. Maybe they will be interested in something else. If they accept, then give them the expectations and then let them move forward and assist them when they ask. Follow up with them regularly.

When and if they choose to take on leadership, or if they just have ideas or suggestions, don't discourage them by rejecting them. Take time to discover how they think it works, give them the opportunity to work out the idea by fleshing out the plan and then have them present it in full form. When this happens ensure that THEY get credit.

When we continue to resist change, new ideas, new energy and vitality that the younger, new members bring, we discourage future leaders from stepping up and taking the reins as we get older and become less able to be involved as much as we once were.

We MUST remember that these young VETERANS are the future of our organization and without them and their commitment, involvement and encouragement from us The American Legion will continue to decrease in members and our voice to congress. They will eventually lose benefits that they deserve.

FINALLY...

We must note that we are the key to this all. It is EVERY Legionnaires responsibility to bring in new members. You don't have to be a salesperson to do it. We can all recognize a veteran. The way they walk, the way they talk, the shirt they wear, the hat they wear. These all help identify a potential member.

Simply start by saying "Thank you for your service. Welcome home!" then ask if they know about The American Legion. The door is now open to a BRIEF description of our mission, who we are and what we do while offering them an application (having a business card with your contact information is helpful as well) and asking if they would consider becoming a member of the world's largest veteran service organization that advocates daily for the retention, improvement and acceptance of benefits for veterans, their families and their communities. We are veterans making America stronger.

If they hesitate, invite them to visit your post, your next meeting or next event. This is how it all starts. When we improve HOW we invite, accept and give value to our members, we improve retention and recruiting efforts and we increase our membership and its continuing participation in the programs of The American Legion.