

**Go-getter, Hamstrung, and Yesteryear Managers
of Older Australians' Leisure Organisations**

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Abstract

Objectives: to investigate the role that managers play within a range of different leisure organisations for older people and how managers react to changing demands from members.

Method: Managers of 29 organisations took part in individual hour-long, semi-structured interviews to determine the organisations' characteristics and how managers adapted to changing social conditions and members' interests. Five categories of organisation were studied namely intellectual, social; hobby, sporting/exercise, and helping others.

Results: Organisational health, as measured by membership growth and managers' perceptions, was highly variable. Three quite different managerial styles were found. These were categorised as “go-getters” (whose groups prosper); the “hamstrung” (whose groups are struggling because of external or internal organisational influences); and “yesteryear” managers (whose groups appear unlikely to survive). Old style senior citizens clubs appeared particularly vulnerable to recent social changes and they may have passed their "use-by" date

Conclusion: The managers' ability to recognise and adapt to changing needs appears to be an essential ingredient in the success of leisure groups. Because these groups are a very cost-effective form of social support for many older people, research into ways of ensuring their continued viability are warranted.

Key words: leisure groups, well-being, third age

Research findings over the past two decades point consistently to a relationship between elderly people's support networks and well-being. Bowling [1] observed that fairly strong evidence exists for a relationship between social support, social network development, health status, mortality, and risk of entry into institutional care. House, Landis and Umberson [2] have argued that the link between poor social support and health status is almost as well documented as that in 1964 between smoking and poor health. Friends play a particularly important role. For example, friends are essential for companionship, emotional support, morale and reduced feelings of loneliness [3]. Events such as retirement, relocation, divorce, or the death of a friend can severely disrupt personal well-being and result in increased emphasis on social networks for support.

Leisure groups can play an important role in helping older people to form new friendships and improve elements of their well-being [4]. Within an Australian context, Gibson and Mugford [5] observed statistically significant associations between organisational membership and positive morale scores amongst older people. They found that participants were less likely to say they were lonely than others who had not recently visited clubs or organisations. This may be particularly important for females, who tend to live longer – and therefore live alone longer [6]. Similarly, Riggs and Mott [7] found that activities and social interaction contributed greatly to increased life satisfaction among older Australians. James and Swindell [8] interviewed members of different kinds of leisure groups. They found that a desire to meet stimulating people and make new friends was often more important to members than the actual sporting, intellectually challenging, social, or hobby activity reasons for joining each type of club.

These leisure organisations provide a wide range of opportunities for companionship and are likely to remain important to large numbers of retired Australians, particularly women. Moreover, because the majority of leisure organisations are largely or entirely self-funded, their promotion within the community would seem to be an inexpensive and socially desirable strategy.

This paper reports on a study of managers of leisure groups for retired Australians. We were particularly interested in the characteristics of groups that were growing or declining and how different management styles of reaction to threats and opportunities affected membership levels. The study was part of a larger one that set out to explain the role that leisure clubs and organisations play in the lives of countless retired Australians.

Method

Twenty-nine semi-structured face-to-face interviews were held with managers of leisure clubs and organisations attended by retired Australians. This was a purposeful sample, designed to provide a cross-section of types of groups and of geographical areas/suburbs. All the organisations were located in the wider Brisbane metropolitan area. One investigator was present at all interviews using a semi-structured question schedule. Interview notes were fully transcribed immediately after each hour-long interview, and content analysis followed. Managers were interviewed from five categories of leisure organisations. These were:

- intellectually challenging groups (that is organisations like bridge clubs, chess clubs, U3A, historical societies and the like, whose principal activities involved cognitively challenging pursuits);
- sporting/exercise groups (such as bowls clubs, aqua aerobics and so forth which have a sport, exercise or physical activity focus);

- social groups (such as senior citizens clubs whose predominant purpose appears to be companionship conducted within a range of passive or mildly active pursuits like bingo, excursions, hobbies, concerts etc.);
- “helping others” groups (for example, Meals-on-Wheels, St Vincent de Paul); and
- specific hobby groups (such as the Queensland Historical Railway Society, horticulture clubs, and so forth, which tended to follow one or a very small number of specialised activities).

These exploratory interviews were held at a site chosen by the managers, most frequently at their offices.

Findings

The interviews provided insights into the operations of leisure organisations, and on the features that attracted and retained members. Many of the managers were forward looking and their activities were obviously meeting the needs of existing members as well as attracting new ones. However, many other organisations had experienced declining membership for several years. In a number of cases the managers had held office for more than 10 years, and some spent more than 20 unpaid hours a week running the organisation. This sustained commitment was resented by some, appeared to give a sense of self-worth to many, and for others, seemed to be central to their social lives.

Growing groups and management styles.

Within the five categories of groups studied females outnumbered males in all except bowls clubs that, traditionally, have attracted more males. Managers were unable to suggest reasons why men appeared to be less interested than women were in belonging to other types of leisure groups. However, the majority of new members who join leisure groups are younger retired females, and the most successful managers had recognised this trend and had introduced new activities specifically intended to attract them. They believe that today’s retirees are attracted to activity and personal development, and are much less interested in passive entertainment, or pursuits that are associated in the public mind with “old age”.

Three categories of groups with increasing levels of membership were found. These were:

- a) groups which meet the demand for programs of cognitive challenge in a social environment. These groups are expected to grow in number and diversity as increasingly better educated cohorts reach retirement;
- b) groups offering innovative exercise/fitness activities like aqua-aerobics clubs, or exercise for keep-fit enthusiasts, within well-established clubs. Again, this category of group is expected to grow in popularity as the link between good health and sensible physical activity in later life becomes better publicised;
- c) groups comprising the older style social clubs with previously declining memberships but whose managers had analysed reasons for the decline, and had taken steps to reverse the trend. For example, a former senior citizens club had responded to declining membership by changing its name and focus in order to “present an image of the nineties” to younger retirees. The club manager was paid from membership fees and a Home and Community Care (HACC) grant. He promoted a range of activities with exercise/fitness themes, such as walking for pleasure, tai chi, and country line dancing. The club was fortunate in being located near public transport, hence it was able to attract members from distant suburbs. The change of the focus of the club had

disadvantaged some former members who wanted to pursue interests such as crochet and knitting, even though the manager reported that there had been “a mass exodus from these classes” over recent years. Although the club continued to offer some of its former activities like card games, only two or three people regularly took part. In contrast, when exercise or line dancing activities were offered, 20 or 30 people took part, and this high level of activity was maintained over time.

A similar example of manager-initiated change was found in another former senior citizens club although this time the manager was unpaid. He reported that, during the eighties, the club was “abuzz” with activity, but the recession of the early nineties and the introduction of poker machines to a nearby RSL club, (where players can also get cheap meals), had “killed a lot of interest”. In order to survive, this organisation had changed its name and made a determined effort to attract younger people, including the pre-retired. Hence the club offered a wide range of activities, including sporting activities, music and craft, as well as the more traditional activities such as bus trips that catered for the interests of the older retired membership.

Unlike some of the social clubs which had decided to cut back on opening hours because of declining interest, the successful clubs discussed above were all heavily involved with activities five or six days a week. The managers were enthusiastic and forward-looking and were clearly responsible for driving many of the changes that appeared to be instrumental in maintaining a sense of vitality and interest amongst the members.

Groups with decreasing membership and their management styles.

The management styles of leisure groups with declining memberships were distinctly different from those of managers of groups with a growing clientele.

All managers of groups with a traditional social focus reported that membership had been in substantial decline over a period of several years. The clientele of such groups were usually older, female, more passive, and generally they participated only when special events were offered. Many managers of senior citizens clubs admitted that their clubs were in trouble. Poker machines, which were legalised in Queensland in the 1980s, were reported to have had a very serious impact on membership. Declining numbers of members who were prepared to help with the voluntary work necessary to keep the club viable compounded this. Currently, the majority of these organisations function mainly because of a sense of commitment by a small number of office bearers, some of whom had been in office for many years and were quite elderly. Office bearers from several of these clubs feared the organisation would not survive if they resigned. Some administrators reported that the only way they could keep members interested was by running special, subsidised functions. As one observed, “people come out of the woodwork when we have a subsidised function such as a Christmas party; the rest of the time we never see them. We try to run concerts and other events which used to interest them but now they can’t be bothered.”

“Helping others” groups, (like Meals on Wheels) traditionally have been heavily reliant on women volunteers. Such groups are facing considerable difficulty in attracting help. According to one administrator, all Meals on Wheels groups are “struggling for volunteers because older people are not volunteering as they did in the past, and many younger women are currently in paid employment.” Throughout Queensland, many of these organisations had tried advertising in the local newspapers and through letter box drop appeals, but to little avail. Currently, Meals on Wheels’ drivers are paid to deliver meals, and there would appear to be an increasing need to pay other staff if governments wish to continue to rely on this very cost-efficient form of social service. Another

manager of a voluntary “helping others” group observed that because older people are now asked to pay for services that were once freely provided to them, these people in turn believe it fair that they should now be paid for their voluntary work. It would appear that the quid pro quo of voluntarism is dying under economic rationalist policies and beliefs.

In all of the “helping others” groups surveyed or contacted, difficulties in attracting volunteers were emphasised. It appears to us that the problem with membership decline in these groups has little to do with management of the organisation itself (similar problems have been reported for surf life-saving clubs that attract a young clientele). Rather, it seems that social change has caused a substantial cultural shift away from the ethos of volunteering and the “common good”. In addition, the pool of female volunteers, who were formerly the life-blood of many organisations, is no longer as readily available.

In some groups managers had recognised the need for innovation in order to attract new members, but had not been able to implement change. For example, in bowls clubs (the only clubs surveyed in which males outnumbered females), there had been such a dramatic decline in membership over recent years that many clubs were facing closure. The tightening of drink driving laws was given as a reason for a fall-off amongst male members, particularly businessmen who used to socialise at the club and who retained their membership after retirement. One manager suggested that an increase might be made in the number of days allocated to women’s competitions to encourage greater female participation. However, there were impediments to change in many bowls clubs that stemmed from historical traditions and reluctance by some long-term members to modify prior gender-based expectations. The traditional white uniform may also deter younger retired people from joining bowls clubs.

Discussion

The success of seniors’ leisure groups appears to be closely linked to the energy and vision of the managers. Of the 29 groups studied only the two Meals-on-Wheels groups and one social group had paid managers. Because the great majority of groups cannot afford to pay a manager they are reliant on volunteer managers drawn from amongst the membership. However, retired people are reported to be far less prepared to volunteer their services than was the case in the past. Even with vibrant and growing groups, some managers commented on the difficulty they encountered in finding anyone who was prepared to assume a leadership role for a comparatively brief period of one or two years. Where managers felt obliged to continue in their roles for year after year, it appeared inevitable that a club would become moribund.

Our observations suggest that it might be possible to derive a simple “rule of thumb” measure for assessing the vitality of older people’s leisure organisations and predict whether they are likely to go into decline. The measure focuses on the managers’ characteristics and the prevalent culture within the organisation. Within the (albeit small) sample of managers interviewed we found three markedly different kinds of managers and organisations which predict survival chances. We describe our managers as “go-getter”, “hamstrung”, and “yesteryear” types.

“Go-getter” managers have an outward looking focus. They appear to enjoy the challenge of change and have responded to changing demographics and interests by developing new activities that cater to changing trends. They have recognised that many recently retired people do not want to belong to an organisation that connotes “old age”. The go-getters have adopted “marketing”

opportunities within the seniors' leisure marketplace, and their organisations offer cognitively, physically challenging or quite specific hobby activities, such as historical railway restorations. Organisations managed by these go-getters are likely to thrive.

“Hamstrung” managers may have considerable vision and energy but they face constraint, external to or within the organisation, which hampers their efforts to adapt to changing circumstances. The majority of “helping others” organisations such as Meals on Wheels are run by managers who are hamstrung by external constraints. They face increasing difficulties in finding volunteers, and they are hamstrung by lack of funds. Governments and other agencies, which rely on the services that “helping-others” organisations provide to the community, should recognise that the ethos of voluntarism on which these organisations were originally founded, has changed.

Managers of other categories of organisations may be hamstrung by internal constraints such as tradition. For example, many bowls clubs are in decline across the nation. Bowls clubs have had a traditional male-dominated focus and some have only recently, and apparently reluctantly, begun to recognise that women may need to play an equal role within the organisation. Some hamstrung managers see a need to repackage the image of bowls in order to attract recently retired or retrenched workers. Other hamstrung managers had traditional, but limited, specific hobby factions within their organisations, for example the bingo enthusiasts. Although bingo remains popular with many older people, younger retirees regard bingo as an “old person’s pastime”. Organisations with hamstrung managers are likely to decline until managers can circumvent the constraints that militate against moving with the times.

“Yesteryear managers” for the most part remain focused on the clubs’ traditional clientele and way of doing things, regardless of a substantial fall in membership. Most would not contemplate a change of direction for fear of disadvantaging or annoying loyal members. Many appear to be keeping the organisation afloat by working quite long hours, using sometimes out-of-date business skills and offering attractions from a bygone era. They find it difficult to find volunteers to help out with the day-to-day tasks of running the organisations. Seemingly, yesterday’s managers run the majority of the old style senior citizens clubs. This category of club and management style may have reached its “use by” date.

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that leisure groups run by “go getter” managers will thrive. Those that are hamstrung by external or internal constraints will need to develop ways of bypassing the constraints if they are to attract new members. “Yesteryear” managers are managing dying leisure organisations that are not changing sufficiently rapidly to attract new members.

The optimal use of resources is essential as social services budgets continue to be eroded. Large numbers of leisure organisations within the community provide retired people with an enjoyable means of extending their social networks while, at the same time, deriving physical or intellectual benefits from the clubs’ various activities. Moreover, because many of these organisations are largely self funding this form of social support costs the community very little to maintain. Thus, it would be a substantial loss to the community if many organisations are forced to close their doors and dispose of assets that might be too expensive to replace in the future.

Membership of leisure groups will grow only if groups offer attractive activities. The managers’ ability to recognise, and adapt to changing needs appears to be an essential ingredient in the success of these groups. However, very little is known about the influence of managerial styles

on organisational membership or on other variables that might affect belonging. Further research into the effects of managerial styles and, indeed, other variables that influence organisational membership, is essential.

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