

These are my notes on the presentation given by Fred Edwords on *Building and Growing Your Secular Group*. Mr. Edwords kindly gave me permission to share my notes with you on Meetup, provided that they are kept limited-access such as with the members-only Discussion Board. All rights, control and credit for this material belong to Mr. Edwords and sources cited.

Please know that the presentation covered a great deal of material very fast. In places I had to paraphrase and reconstruct. Any errors are my own. -Craig Waterman

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Building and Growing Your Secular Group **By Michael Werner as modified by Fred Edwords**

Preface:

This is a two-hour version of what was originally a three-hour seminar. As such, it removes Werner's opening part where attendees introduce themselves and discuss their individual hopes for the seminar as well as the issues their groups are facing. It also removes the brainstorming session, using a Post-it note technique, at the end. But there is interaction encouraged throughout.

Befitting my own style, I've dispensed with Werner's PowerPoint presentation that throws words on the screen indicating the major subject headings. I've also reorganized some of the material into what I consider a more logical order, added some material of my own, and put everything on 3x5" index cards segmented into discrete SECTIONS, Subsections, and Sub-subsections. I've also added an introductory historical context within which I place the seminar (so as to highlight its current relevance). -**Fred Edwords**

Introduction

According to the latest polls (ARIS, PEW, Barna, Gallup), 15% of Americans are nontheist: (atheist, agnostic, or apathist). We outnumber all of the minority religions combined. But we are not as organized. They have a Mormon lobby, a Jewish lobby, and so on. If only we could mobilize our numbers, or even a significant fraction of our numbers, just imagine the things we could do. Remember! The majority does not rule the country; they never have and never will. It is well-organized minorities that set our course.

After WWII (where freethinkers had been targeted by Hitler too), humanists organized. By 1970 it became no big deal to be a humanist or an atheist in Europe. Some of the most secular countries on Earth today are in Europe.

In the US during the 1960s, if no one else would publish your book, you could always go to a vanity press and pay to have your book published--unless you were an atheist. Not even vanity presses would publish a book by an atheist. There were precious few atheistic resources available to those in doubt. Atheists were isolated, marginalized, and despised in their own country.

The Internet has been the great equalizer. Now support, community, and atheistic literature are only a mouse-click away! The dam broke in 2004 when Sam Harris became the first person in modern times to have an overtly atheistic book published by a mainstream national press. His book, *The End of Faith*, became a national best seller and paved the way for other best-selling works by authors such as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins.

In the past decade our numbers have grown and continue to swell, especially among the youth (those 30 and under) and among women. Ethnic diversity in our movement has increased. National organizations have seen dramatic increases in enrollment. The *Freedom From Religion Foundation* (FFRF), as of August 2012, reports having over 19,000 members (according to Dan Barker at the conference), while the American Humanist

Association (AHA) has over 35,000 active internet friends. Numbers exceeding 25,000 people turned out for the 2012 Reason Rally on the Mall in Washington DC.

Building & Growing Your Secular Group

Reflect for a moment on your own group. How is your group doing? Have you experienced growth? Is your very existence a product of this change? Why haven't more people joined? There is a pent-up hunger for secular groups such as your own; a tremendous potential for growth with the promise of influence and the force for change that growth, acceptance, and organization can bring. The number and diversity of local groups has proliferated. Membership is way up. Community, educational, social, political, charitable, campus, parenting, and singles are all represented. How can you tap into this potential to grow your group? How can you avoid the common pitfalls which have been the ruin of many good organizations? These are the things we will examine today.

On the Nature of Tribes

When you build a group, you are building a tribe. It is important to understand the nature of tribes in general as well as the nature of your own tribe.

- * Tribes share a common identity. Secular groups identify by their insistence on the separation of Church and State. Humanists identify by their common belief that to advance the well-being of humanity for the sake of humanity is a self-justifying good. Freethinkers identify by their insistence on the primacy of reason and the right of people to think for themselves rather than give blind assent to any particular creed, teacher, or leader. (Question boldly even the existence of God, as Jefferson put it.)
- * Tribes embrace a unique history or narrative of origin. Freethinkers trace their roots back to the Enlightenment and to deist philosophers such as Locke and Hume. Materialist Naturalists trace their origins through Darwin back to the Ancient Greeks. (By contrast, Mormons trace their origins to Joseph Smith in upstate New York and certain Angelic Golden Plates.)
- * Tribes feel oppressed by the outside world. (If you think it is tough being an evangelical Christian in America today, try being not-a-Christian.)
- * Tribes develop their own terms and jargon and will often fail to recognize that outsiders may not know what such terms mean. This can be a barrier when you are trying to reach out to others. A humorous example comes from Herb Silverman who, one day, while wearing a favorite t-shirt with the slogan "Extraordinary Claims Require Extraordinary Evidence" was mistaken for being in the insurance business by a friendly restaurant diner.
- * Tribes have unique observances. Secular observances can include Darwin Day (a global phenomenon), Earth Day, the National Day of Reason, the Vernal Equinox, World Humanist Day (summer solstice), Banned Books Week, National Secular Service Day, HumanLight, Festivus, and the winter solstice
- * Tribes are never larger than 150 members, called Dunbar's Number. [Footnote 1] Size matters. To survive and maintain tight-knit communities, you need to form sub-groups whenever one of your groups grows to have from 50 to 100 active members. Form groups based on common interests--be they books, lectures, outreach, and so on--in support of your groups over-arching purpose or mission. This is how megachurches grow. Megachurches tribalize and have activities throughout the week. Their facilities are rarely idle as sub-groups meet for book or movie clubs, lecture and social functions, parenting, political, and so forth.

If you find that a common interest does not directly support your global nature, consider budding off to form new groups. Other secular groups have successfully done so, such as the *New York Society for Ethical Culture* (NYSEC) and *The Washington Area Secular Humanists* (WASH). Today WASH branches encompass portions of three states. Remember: twice as many groups mean twice as many members.

An example from religion is the case of the Hutterites. Whenever a colony reached an upper limit of around 20

families (which, it turns out, is consistent with Dunbar's Number), the communities would split, by family units, into two equitable groups. The business interests would be similarly divided. Communal buildings at a new, distant location would be built; after which one of the two groups, as selected by lottery, would move to a new location and begin a new colony. (According to *Wikipedia*, over 125 years since arriving in North America their numbers grew from 400 to around 42,000 members.) [Footnote 2]

Cultivating a Thriving Group

Types of Groups

Understanding the nature of your group

Are you independent or do you have one or more parent organizations? Is your group one which is:

Self-supporting and affirming or Activist (aggressive)
Theoretical or Experiential
Lecture/discussion or social/community
Project/goal or Social (activity/outing) oriented
Mission (purpose-driven) or Open-ended (tolerant/accepting, input-driven)

There can be a blending of group types, which is fine. The important thing is to understand the core nature of your particular group, whatever that nature may be.

Groups Are Not Defined by Ideology but by What They Do

The importance of a Mission Statement

What is the main function of your group? What is your overriding reason for existence? Come up with a mission statement. You need to specialize in some way so your group doesn't become too scattered in its goals. How can you recognize when your group is defusing away if you don't know your own group's mission? Have a mission. Protect the boundaries. But don't be afraid to change your mission as a group when you see the need. Good fences make good groups and good neighbors. Choose a group name which reflects your mission. [Footnote 3]

When deciding on your mission, don't get hung up on terms. Many groups have fractured over petty quibbles of definitions. For this reason, feel free to use terms such as atheist, agnostic, freethinker, rationalist, secularist, skeptic, humanist (religious or secular), but NEVER define the terms in your mission statement. Let the meanings float free.

Set Measurable Goals, both short term and long term. Make them achievable. For example, a long term goal is to open a permanent building for your group to meet in and function out of, a short term goal might be to raise funds to do so. A shorter term goal towards that end may be to form planning committees on funding, management, location search, and so on. Set a timetable so you can evaluate progress toward your goals.

When writing your mission statement, consider secondary missions in support of the primary and codify them. Have a financial growth plan. In this regard, treat your group like a business.

Is There Anybody Out There?

The importance of advertising

Get your group name out there. Have your texters promote your group on the web. Reach out to the media to get reporters to cover your activities in the community.

People need to know you exist. Advertise!

Do Publicity Stunts such as throwing a "Fiction for Fiction Day" in which everyone who brings in a Bible or

other holy book gets a different work of fiction in exchange.

Secular groups have had great success with billboards and bus ads, but you don't need an expensive campaign to get the word out.

Use the Internet and traditional media. Join Meetup.com. Harness word-of-mouth. Write letters to the editor on controversial issues which you support and mention your group. Ask a human-interest reporter or religious affairs reporter to cover a particular activity of your group as you work for the community.

Wear your group's T-shirt and do community service. Have an open and friendly method of discussing and promoting your group with those who ask. Volunteer to help Meals on Wheels. Visit the sick and elderly among your members. (Why should nontheists who are vulnerable or in the greatest need be visited only by the religious?) Support battered women shelters or Habitat for Humanity projects.

Seek regional sister groups and invite them to join your picnics or other functions. Seek cooperative relationships with outside groups. For example, perhaps your group can host, support, help organize, or advertise for a regional Science Cafe function. Arrive at the lecture early and claim a prominent table for your group. Bring a nice table tent sign bearing your group's name. Greet people and introduce yourself and your group.

Host intergenerational or joint organizational gatherings, such as a picnic. Rent a booth and host an exhibit at local fairs or festivals. Get active! Advertising does not have to cost great sums. Find ways to get it done.

Be Welcoming

One of the biggest reasons new people fail to join a group after one or two visits is because the group is perceived as being insular, cloistered, closed, unfriendly, and cold. The visitor feels shut out, ignored, not valued, and unwelcome. Don't let this happen to your visitor! Be inclusive without being pushy or putting the visitor on the spot. Allow room in the conversation for your visitor. Smile. Ask general, non-threatening questions and listen when they speak. Seek topics of common interest. Do not dominate the conversation and do not allow your more outspoken members to trample on your visitor when he or she has something to share. Don't be pushy and don't gang up! A new visitor often feels uncomfortable when all eyes are on her or him. Give a person time to acclimatize and feel comfortable. New visitors need space to observe, to breathe, and to evaluate their place within a group. Recognize when your visitor needs space. Respect that breathing space and let them know they are welcome. Let your visitor get comfortable with you one or two people at a time, every visit. Don't be the only two people your visitor gets to know. Friends make all the difference for turning new visitors into new members.

Respect Your Allies

Don't let labels divide you. All of us, regardless of the labels we use or the elements of our movement that we emphasize, are in this together. So be friendly with activist and non-activist groups alike, in-your-face types and those who work in interfaith alliances. Sometimes it is good to have a friend in the machine. By trying to purge those who don't fit your ideal and acting uncooperative with allies who you don't consider pure enough, your group will become very narrow. This may be fine if you have a small group and wish to stay small, but allies can be your friends and help you grow.

Consider the following examples of alliances working toward the same end. While Act Up drew lots of attention, thus raising awareness of homosexuals in our communities and their desire not to be marginalized or discriminated against, Log Cabin Republicans played the game from the inside and won an important gay rights ruling in the Supreme Court. And while Mohandas Gandhi was leading the masses in protests of non-resistance, it was Nehru, working within the government, who was responsible for principles of humanism being written into the Indian Constitution.

Draw on the strengths of your members in support of your core nature. Not everyone needs to conform to the same mold. Not everyone is cut out to be a diplomat or an activist but everyone can fill a need. Respect all styles of groups. Each fills a different need. In the end, we are all going in the same direction.

Pitfalls to Avoid

Mission Problems

- 1.) Narrowness of style pitfall. This may be fine if you want your group to stay small, but an overly narrow focus will constrain your group and prevent growth. Instead, form sub-groups in support of your main mission.
- 2.) The Lecture-discussion model pitfall. This model soon degrades into “three angry old white men around a library table.” Lecture-discussion can be part of your makeup but don’t make it the sole or even the primary reason you exist.
- 3.) The “More Atheist than Thou” pitfall. Avoid always chewing the cud on why there is no God. Avoid over focusing on definitions and categories (all of us are essentially the same).
- 4.) The Constant Negativity pitfall. “Stop that!”, “Boy are things bad,” “Let's punish these people!” Negativity is a turn-off. You need a positive outlook if you hope for growth. Don't drive good people away.
- 5.) The Insularity pitfall, or a Failure to Accommodate Different Styles. As an example, women tend to be community oriented and focus on cooperation. Men tend to be competition oriented and focus on what the individual can do—the “I win.” If either is incapable of accommodating different styles, they won't have much of a group. Be more than merely a refuge for village atheist outcasts.

Leadership Problems

- 6.) Do not burn out your good people by dumping all the work on one person or by allowing one person to take it all on. Avoid concentrated leadership. Don't find yourself in the situation where one person has all the keys to the kingdom. If only one member has the passwords to your website, for example, and something happens with him or her, you may find yourself stuck with a website you can't change and can't even shut down.
- 7.) A failure to trust. The root of leadership problems is often a basic lack of trust of your own people. This lack of trust can be fatal. Don't worry that people will prove unreliable. A full 50% of people will fail to carry through. Expect it and don't get mad at people for being people. Recognize that this means 50% will prove themselves to be reliable and worthy of greater responsibility. How can you identify your strengths if you are unwilling to give them a try?

The president shouldn't *do anything*. One's role, as president, should be to diversify responsibility, to develop leadership, to rotate members into positions of power, to plan, observe, organize, supervise, and delegate work and authority to those who will actually carry out the labor. In this way you will prevent burnout of your key personnel; will encourage a strong sense of membership, engagement, and community; and will grow your group. Test your people, trust your people, and grow.

Practice the principle of Shared Leadership with your officers and board members. Put others in charge of committees and projects. Ask a variety of people: age, sex, ethnicity, and so on, to participate. Rotate new people in.

- 8.) A Failure to Delegate. Form committees and task forces to get things done. Examples are: a social committee, an activist (socio-political) committee, an Internet promotion committee (great for your texters and tweeters!), a finance committee [Footnote 4], a program (meetings and activities) committee, and a social (greeting, mingling, food) committee. Have a very strong membership chair. [Footnote 5]

In an ideal world your board of directors would only set policy and delegate responsibility and work to staff and committee chairs. But in the real world of small volunteer nonprofits it's usually necessary to have a working board where each board member also heads up a project, a committee, or has some other specific responsibility (such as the president's job to supervise). Keep the size of your board and committees to between five and fifteen members, with an ideal size of eight.

9.) Failure to put in place a method of succession for the group leadership. Don't get caught flat-footed if a key person suddenly leaves for whatever reason.

10.) Failure to polish diamonds in the rough. Embrace the "come outers" from traditional religion who may come to you, especially the young, but beware of toxic personalities. Don't elect them to positions of power. If someone proves to be destructive to the harmony of your group, know that you may have to inform them that they are no longer welcome. Be willing to ask them to leave. You have a right to say "No. That is not acceptable. Thank you for exploring our group but, I'm sorry, here we must part ways."

This being said, understand that many people who join secular groups are what the late Sherwin Wine called "the walking wounded" of our movement. They may need an outlet in which to vent, and you should try to provide one, perhaps in the form of a Recovering from Religion group. Give them time to heal and they will appreciate it. But also give them a means of transitioning into a healthy relationship within your group. Don't allow them to stagnate in a pool of toxic bitterness at past wrongs.

Don't ask new members to take on positions of power. You can make exceptions to self-identifying new members who express a willingness and who you deem qualified, but this should be the exception which makes the rule. Pressing new people into positions of power too soon will make your organization appear shaky, desperate, and unattractive.

11.) The pitfall of Indifference. Make new members feel welcome. Greet newcomers immediately; everyone can be a greeter. Shake their hands and thank them for coming. Include them in your discussions without ever putting them on the spot. Continually be aware of the impression your group is making. Ask yourself how attractive your group is to people coming in the door. When the meeting ends, express how much you enjoyed their presence and invite them to join you again. People who fail to make six friends within six months of joining a group tend to drop out. Don't let this happen to your group.

The same is true for current members. Invite them on a personal level to join your function and express your enjoyment of their company. Personally asking people to come to a meeting *doubles* attendance.

12.) Group Stagnation. Be attentive to and weed your garden. Taking on too many projects can be as bad as having too few. Find a balance which supports your mission.

13.) Lack of structure. Boundaries are good. Protect them. Yet be willing to change them as a group when the need arises.

14.) Lack of Community. Keep people involved. Ask people to do things, they will surprise you with what they will do.

15.) Failure to Run Quality Meetings. Your meetings should start on time, stick to an agenda, and finish on time. Don't fall into the trap of allowing your meetings to languish beyond the appointed times. Even if your membership is enjoying the meeting today, they may come to expect that "if I attend this meeting, I'll never get out of there; and I have things to do."

Choose a meeting room which is light and airy rather than dark and gloomy. Your gathering should be attractive to the casual by-passer as well as to your members.

Have meeting rooms sized so they are filled between 60 and 75%. If more people show up than you can comfortably accommodate, this may not be a bad thing for one meeting; just chose a large venue for your next gathering.

Do only the tech you can master. Evangelists and pornographers are the most advanced in tech mastery with big budgets to buy the best equipment and hire the best personal to operate it. Do not think that you must compete at that level. Assign responsibility for tech and have a contingency plan if your techie falls through. Do only the tech you can master and you will look professional. Practice your tech. Have everything tested well before the meeting to be sure it is working. Don't be the bumblers who are struggling to get the multimedia running after the appointed time for the meeting to begin.

Run quality meetings, not ones where you simply breathe your own exhaust talking about how right you are.

Don't tolerate behavior that is dominating, ugly, unnecessarily argumentative, or rude. Manage discussion. Have a moderator assigned to every meeting, especially for speaker questions. Ultimately some fundamentalist will join the group to either monitor or even disrupt you. Handle it wisely and humanely.

Offer fun meetings with global appeal which are family friendly and accommodate children. Don't have all of your meetings be about abstractions. Positive examples include National Day of Reason celebrations, solstice and equinox parties, feel good days, picnics, pot-lucks, and pitch-in gatherings.

Invite guest speakers and have a balance of speaker styles, genders, and ethnicities. For subject matter, mix up inner life topics with inter-relational, sociopolitical, and global viewpoints. Universities and nonprofits have speakers bureaus. Invite local professors, especially those with members in their classes, to speak at your group. Seek out local authors who have books to peddle. Provide interesting motivations for members and guests to attend your meetings.

16.) The *Roberts Rules of Order* Fetish Pitfall. *Roberts Rules of Order* was developed to manage LARGE groups, letting them function in an orderly manner. But these same rules can be a frustrating hindrance to allowing small groups to get things done. If you have fifteen or fewer members present, *DON'T* follow *Roberts Rules of Order* except in special cases. Instead, use a consensus system. [Footnote 6]

17.) Failure to run quality board meetings.

Use the consensus, out of consensus, break consensus method.

Use name tents. When someone wishes to speak, have them stand their name tent on end and call on them in the order the tents are stood. Don't make them raise their hands like kids in class.

Use an agenda and stick to it (avoid tangents). Keep meetings short and to the point.
Keep board sizes to between 5 and 15 members with an optimum size of 8.

Parting Comment

Develop simple and effective ways of communicating your ideas to the public. For example, you can say:
“Atheism isn't a belief; it's a conclusion.”

Footnotes

[1] Dunbar's Number, first proposed by British anthropologist Robin Dunbar, represents the theoretical number of individuals with whom stable inter-personal relationships can be maintained. This number is generally taken to be about 150 individuals, though Dunbar himself proposed no specific number. -Source: *Wikipedia*

[2] The Hutterites, a communal Anabaptist denomination with origins in Germany, share much in common with the Old Amish. They practice a tight-knit communal lifestyle, keep to themselves, practice strict pacifism, and try to maintain the old religious traditions. Historically, the Hutterites were often the target of mistrust and persecution in Europe, America and Canada. Today two-thirds of existent Hutterite colonies are in Canada with a few colonies still in the United States. The structured and orderly method of forming new colonies described above is not universally followed by all Hutterite colonies. Variations exist. -Source: *Wikipedia*

[3] Make sure your group name is Googlable and mnemonic: unique, findable, memorable. Be careful in your choice of acronym (don't pick FUCK: FUUCC = First Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbus--people will laugh at you).

[4] If your group wishes to buy real estate, than you absolutely need to incorporate, get a business license, and pay taxes or became a 501(c)3 non-profit group.

[5] The function of the membership chair is to recruit, support, and retain new and current members, to promote the benefits of membership, to aid the president in identifying quality talent worthy of greater responsibilities within the group, and to see that members receive the recognition for actions and achievements which they deserve.

[6] Consensus System

First, Discuss your issue.

Ask, "Do we have a consensus?" If no one speaks, then you do and can consider the issue settled without taking a vote on that which you already agree.

Ask, "Is Anyone Out of Consensus?" If someone raises a concern, place the concern in the record.

Ask, "Does Anyone Want to Break Consensus?" If anyone speaks in the affirmative than take a vote.