Friends Partnerships

## *Understanding and Managing through the Life Cycles*

Background:

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has benefitted from the support of Friends organizations since the 1930s. From cooperating associations to "Friends of…", these community-based organizations have been vital to the protection of Refuges, Hatcheries and Wetland Management Districts. These partners are our eyes and ears on the ground, creating life-long connections to the public and other key stakeholders, while accomplishing mutual goals supporting their affiliated conservation site – all in the spirit of the perpetuation of wildlife conservation.

As with many non-profit organizations, there are financially stable times paired with strong community support, as well as periods of decreased donations and membership, and less actively engaged citizens. Financial hardships and decreased community involvement can be very trying on a passionate Friends board, but changes are a normal process for nonprofit organizations. In order to maintain effectiveness and relevance, it is imperative that Service staff and Friends members understand the different life cycle stages of these organizations, which stage a Friends organization is currently in, and how to address the goals and challenges of that specific stage.

Figure 1 depicts the seven organizational Life Cycle Stages. The supporting text explains the normal life cycles of nonprofit organizations, defines each stage and identifies both the goals and challenges within each of the stages. There is a wealth of varying information on organizational lifecycle stages. This fact sheet presents one model that has been adapted as a general guide to help you be better prepared to prioritize and address your Friends partnership needs.

Figure 1

Credit: Susan Kenny Stevens, Ph.D., *Nonprofit Lifecycles: Stage-based Wisdom for Nonprofit Capacity*
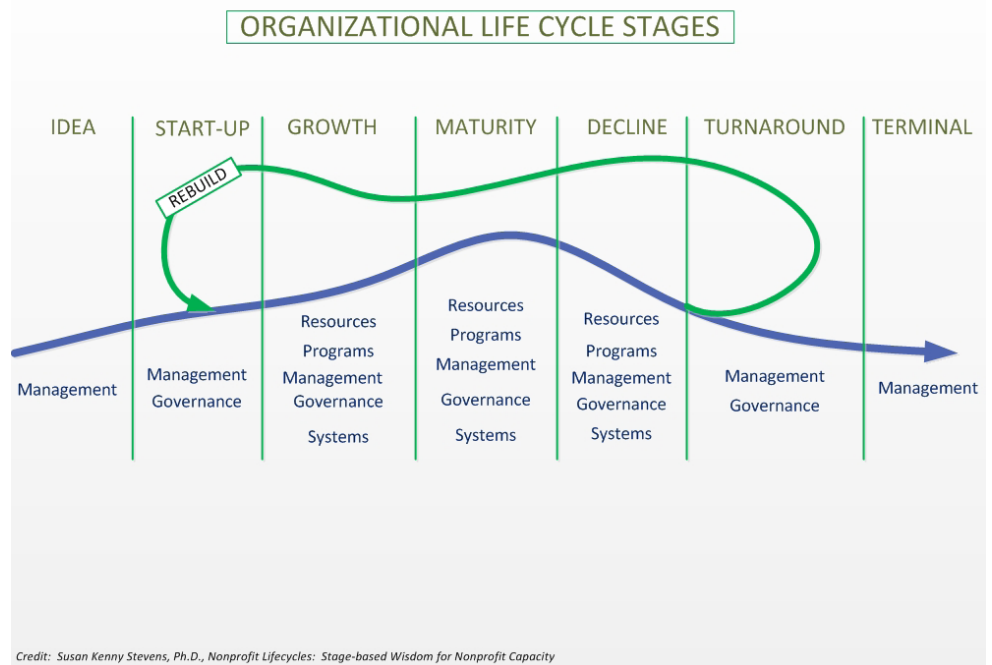
Definitions:

Financial Resources are sources of revenue. Programs may include Friends activities, events, projects, etc. Management includes the president (or other leaders) for the Friends organization. Governance refers to the board of directors and/or organization staff. Administrative systems are the organization's operational functionality and processes.

Lifecycle Stage #1

The Idea Stage: The Magnificent Obsession

Overview:

A perceived community need sparks a founding idea or vision of what could be.

Dominant Characteristics:

- Management: Originators are credible, action-oriented people with a commitment to supporting their local field site.

Goals:

- Clearly articulate and identify the unmet need.

- Develop a vision and mission.

- Mobilize the support of others.

- Convert the idea into action.

Challenges to Avoid:

- Beginning program work.

- Assigning roles and responsibilities to Service staff and members.

- Trying to fundraise.

- Establishing an operations plan.

Lifecycle Stage #2

The Start-up Stage: The Labor of Love

Overview:
The beginning stage of operations when energy and passion are at their highest, but systems generally lag far behind.

Dominant Characteristics:
- Management: A leader is chosen who is a "spark-plug" and the organization's most experienced member.

- Governance: Members become more cohesive as they almost always have a personal connection to the mission or founder.

Goals:
- Share vision and organizational roles and responsibilities with members, Service staff and local constituencies.

- Develop and sign Friends Partnership Agreement with the Service and obtain 501(c)(3) status.

- Develop a versatile membership program.

- Recruit new members.

- Fundraise to leverage sweat equity of outside support.

- Operate within initial financial means.

Challenges to Avoid:
- Creating multifaceted programs for the field site.

- Investing in projects that will not generate revenue.

- Internalizing all financial and administrative functions and not seeking additional outside support.

Lifecycle Stage #3

The Growth Stage: Becoming Who You Are

Overview:
Program opportunity and service demand exceed current systems and structural capacities.

Dominant Characteristics:
- Program: Organization begins to understand and define the distinctive methods and approach that separates its programming from what the field site is able to provide.

- Management: Organization is led by board members who see infinite potential for services.

- Governance: Board structure begins to develop and solidify.

- Resources: More sources of income create greater accounting and compliance complexities.

- Systems: Current systems must now become more sophisticated and improve to meet demands of continual program expansion and rising compliance expectations.

Goals:
- Develop a board and formalize organizational structure by writing bylaws and operations/strategic plans.

- Enhance board communications, cooperation and meeting effectiveness.

- Solidify fiscal operations by diversifying revenues and managing cash flow.

- Seek legal support/advice.

Challenges to Avoid:
- Failing to identify distinctive competence.

- Creating a program and strategic focus that stifles/limits creativity and vision.

- Becoming closed to new ideas, methods, and processes.

Lifecycle Stage #4

The Maturity Stage: Keeping Your Edge

Overview:
Organization has a reputation for providing steady, relevant and vital support to the field site and operates with a solid organizational foundation and an overall sense of security.

Dominant Characteristics:
- Programs: Well-organized, results quantifiable and in-touch with field priorities and needs.

- Management: Executive leadership is often second or third generation from the originators.
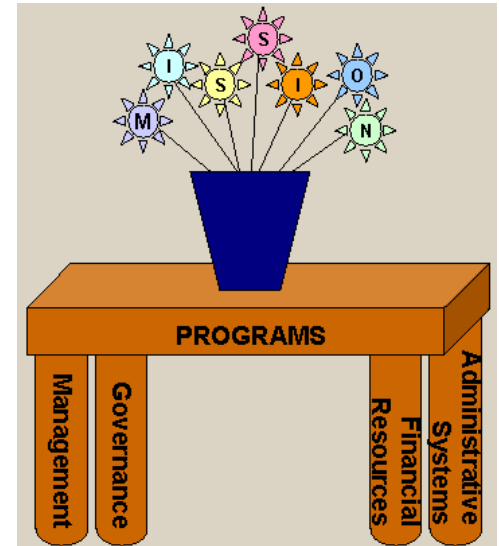
- Governance: Board sets direction, is policy oriented and leaves management to the executive director.

- Resources: Organization has multiple sources of income and this diversity provides additional stability.

- Systems: Organization operates with an outlined course of action for routine field site, board and personnel matters.

Goals:
- Remain mission-centered, rather than policy-bound.

- Keep members motivated around the mission.

- Build financial stability and diversity.

- Become position rather than person dependent.

- Pursue nature store development/management, if applicable.

- Hire staff, if applicable.

Challenges to Avoid:
- Losing the programmatic "edge".

- Lack of communication between Service staff and Friends members.

- Slipping into Lifecycle Stage #5 by not adjusting to inevitable changes in the organization and/or partnership.

Lifecycle Stage #5

The Decline Stage: Someone You Used to Be

Overview:
Organization makes status quo decisions based on internal factors rather than external field site priorities/needs. These decisions result in diminished communications resulting in declining Service staff involvement. The organization finds itself with insufficient funds to cover operating expenses.

Dominant Characteristics:
- Program: Programs are losing attendance; no longer have the support of Service staff.

- Management: Organizational slippage is either unseen, denied, or blamed on external sources. Membership is declining.

- Governance: Board is unaware there is something wrong; they think things are running smoothly and often do not take action until money starts running out. Board members retire or resign; organization is unable to fill vacant board positions.

- Resources: Budgets are fixed-cost and expense heavy, with income projections reflecting past experience rather than current reality.

- Systems: Systems, although developed, are often antiquated, and physical space may be deteriorating.

Goals:
- Reconnect with field site priorities/needs, discarding duplicative programs which provide no added value.

- Remain open to creativity and calculated risk-taking. Do not allow the organization to be driven solely by policies, procedures, systems and structures.

- Keep board informed and engaged; recruit new members.

- Raise enough operating income so reserves are not drawn down for everyday use.

Challenges to Avoid:
- Lack of, or degraded communication between Service staff and Friends members.

- Asking Friends organization to increase programming.

- Spending the Friends organization's budget on top-heavy administrative expense.

Lifecycle Stage #6

The Turnaround Stage: When the Rubber Meets the Road

Overview:
An organization that is at a critical juncture because of lost community support and revenues, but, through self-awareness and determination, has taken decisive action to reverse prior actions in favor of mission relevance and organizational viability.

Dominant Characteristics:
- Management: Turnaround leader is a confident, strong-willed person with a clear sense of direction and the ability to inspire others.

- Governance: A core of committed board members are ready to do what it takes to restore organizational integrity.

Goals:
- Find a turnaround champion to lead the organization through rebuilding the start-up stage characteristics as described in Lifecycle Stage #2.

- Establish a culture and mindset of success and progress.

- Commit to a consistently frank and open dialogue with Service staff, funders and the local community.

- Restore eroded community credibility through consistency, honesty and program results.

Challenges to Avoid:
- Poor assessment or modification of programs in light of current needs and financial viability.

- Unwillingness to cut expenses to reflect realistic income and cash flow.

- Refusing to accept that existing policies and procedures may be too complex, expensive, and "mature" for the turnaround organization. (Refusing to adapt.)

Lifecycle Stage #7

The Terminal Stage: In Name Only

Overview:
An organization that has lost its will, reason or energy to exist.

Dominant Characteristics:
- Program: Programming is unreliable, unsteady, and seriously under-funded.

- Management: Staff and management have dwindled to a handful; not sustainable.

- Governance: Board has lost its collective drive to continue and may exist in name only.

- Resources: The organization has lost all available financial resources and is accruing accumulated deficits.

- Systems: All operational systems have been abandoned so that organizational decisions and general workflow happen on an ad hoc basis.

Goals:
- Accept responsibility for organizational renewal (as a new organization) or termination.

- Resist the urge to blame others for terminal situation.

- Communicate termination plans to field site and make appropriate referrals.

- Dissolve organization in an honorable/respectful manner, worthy of the care in which the nonprofit was founded.

- If organizational founding needs no longer exists, recognize and proceed with amenable retirement of group.

Challenges to Avoid:
- Refusing to accept termination when all of the above characteristics are met.

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