



Society for
Technical
Communication

FAST-START LEADER'S GUIDE

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To Kay

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

How do you write proper Acknowledgments when you are lucky enough to have dozens, maybe even hundreds, of special people who are responsible for developing incredible programs that supported the content of this unique publication? I do take credit for one thing: surrounding myself with amazing people. Because the Florida STC Chapter is an organization that attracts so many fine people, other leaders and I have found no shortage of talented individuals willing to fill key positions. Some of those individuals began their STC careers while still students at the University of Central Florida. They made a wise decision and participated in the Future Technical Communicators (FTC) club at UCF and joined our STC chapter as student members. Many of these former students are now key leaders in today's chapter. An ongoing pipeline of fresh talent and leadership from UCF ensures the continued success of our community.

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The acknowledgments for this book is shared in many ways—not only by the people I have already mentioned but also by *you* if you have stuck with me until the very end. In the vastness of space and immensity of time, it has been my joy to inhabit a planet and share an epoch with such special people.

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Introduction

Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!

Henry David Thoreau

This guide isn't like any leadership publication you've ever read. While most publications, such as STC's informative *Community Handbook*, focus on the details of running a community, the *Fast-Start Leader's Guide* is more philosophical in nature. It addresses ways of thinking, not ways of doing, that have proved to be very successful over a long period of time—the *why's* rather than the *what's* and the *how-to's*.

This *Fast-Start Leader's Guide* is based on decades of success in building and rebuilding various types and sizes of volunteer organizations, often pulling them from the brink of extinction. This experience also includes many years of community service culminating in three years of STC chapter presidency that led to Chapter of Distinction honors every year.

As the Thoreau quote above implies, these concepts are based on simplicity. They are basic to establishing a strong foundation on which to build a successful organization. Know, however, that STC, like any dynamic organization, is constantly growing and changing. Keep your mind open to new concepts that you may not find in this guide.

Every effort has been made throughout this publication to remain brief and to the point. It is up to you to choose the concepts that you believe will work in your community and apply as many of them as often as you see fit. The point here is to explore *thinking* that has proved successful time and time again. How you apply it, or even *whether* you apply it, is entirely up to you.

This guide is an assimilation of thoughts that have been proved successful by some of the most highly recognized and respected STC communities. It is essentially a collection of various philosophies or ways of thinking that represent *suggestions* you may wish to consider in establishing and evolving your own community.

Because building “The Foundation” is the key to being a fast-start leader, the majority of the text is dedicated to this first step in building a successful community. “The Walls” and “The Roof” provide brief ideas for what to accomplish during those phases. Again, these are just suggestions. Pick and choose as you will. Perhaps they will at least inspire your own ideas.

Good luck on your journey!

Editorial Note: Throughout this guide, the terms “chapter” and “community” are used interchangeably and can refer to chapters or Special Interest Groups.

The Audience for This Guide

You only live once, but if you do it right, once is enough.
Mae West

This guide was developed for use by any of the following audiences:

- New leaders who “can’t see the forest for the trees,” who feel overwhelmed and would benefit from a focus on the basics of running a successful community
- Experienced leaders who feel the need to refocus on the basics
- Leaders who feel that their communities have generally grown weak and wish to rebuild them from the ground up
- Leaders of new communities who want their chapter or Special Interest Group (SIG) to get off to the great start that ensures future success.

Here’s even *more* good news! You can apply these same concepts to Cub Scout packs, Little League Baseball organizations, your work environment, and even your family unit. The concepts, with only slight wording changes, are all the same: first the foundation, then the walls, then the roof.

If you are asking yourself what it takes to become a leader, you are already well on the way. Some questions you may want to ask are provided in **Appendix A**, “What It Takes to Be a Leader.”

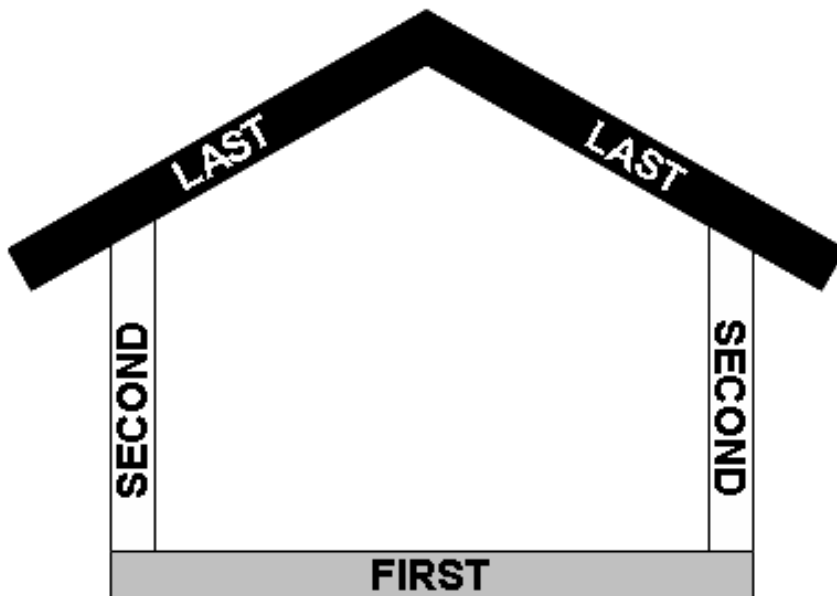
The Concept

Every moment spent planning saves three or four in execution.
Crawford Greenwalt

It's really quite obvious when you think about it. The same concept applies to building roads or buildings, establishing successful businesses, or having a solid marriage—you have to build (and maintain) a strong foundation that will support everything else.

Think of a House

Throughout this guide, you will find the analogy of a house. Think of the very basic structure of a house, such as the one shown in the illustration below. The basic components are a foundation, walls, and a roof—and obviously you would always build the foundation first.



Blocking and Tackling

Another way of illustrating this concept is by applying it to the sports world, specifically football. The foundation of everything a football player does always comes back to the basic elements of blocking and tackling. If a team is struggling, you will often hear coaches and commentators talk about “going back to the basics.” Once these skills have been focused on and resolidified, everything else the team does goes much more smoothly.

To follow through on the football analogy, the “walls” likely consist of things like lights for the field, additional or better equipment, and better practice facilities, while the “roof” may be great-looking uniforms, a glossy game program, or pre-game meals at a five-star

restaurant. All of these things are nice to have, but they are certainly not necessary to form a team and have a good season.

“I’ll Huff and I’ll Puff…”

The three little pigs knew a lot about building strong houses—well, at least *one* of them did. While the houses of sticks and straw were quick and easy to build, they couldn’t withstand challenges to their structures. The Big Bad Wolf made short work of the first two. The only house that weathered the storm was the one with the strong brick walls. If your community has strong foundation and walls, it will be much easier to withstand the huffing and puffing forces inherent in building and maintaining a successful organization.

Keep It Simple

Simplicity is the peak of civilization.

Jessie Sampter

You’ve heard it many times before—*keep it simple!* As you read the next sections in this guide, notice how simple and basic are the elements that make up the recommended foundation and how logically you construct the walls and the roof. Simplicity is the key.

Good luck!

The Foundation



Much like the preparation you must go through to execute a technical communication project or to build the foundation for an actual house, building a solid foundation for your community involves mixing several key elements with a healthy dose of patience, commitment, and teamwork. Just as you need to plan properly for that technical communication project, so must you plan for a successful community.

Set Up a “Basic” Administrative Council

Technical skill is mastery of complexity, while creativity is mastery of simplicity.
Christopher Zeeman

Of course the first thing you need is a basic Administrative Council consisting of at least a president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer. If necessary, you can combine the secretary and treasurer positions. *The Community Handbook* (available from stc.org after login) contains lots more information about these positions. After the first year of operation, you will have an immediate past president who plays an active role in council decision-making. These positions are *foundational* to the community’s success.

STC history tells us there was once a chapter that had become very weak. Attendance was low, as was morale and interest in the chapter’s programs. After one particularly dismal turn-out for a meeting, three members who cared deeply about the chapter’s future met on the front steps of the meeting place. They observed that nearly the entire evening’s attendance had consisted of members of the chapter’s Education Committee. The manager of that committee was especially strong and had built it to the point where it had essentially *become* the chapter. Because they felt their chapter and its survival was much more important than any one committee, the three members “raided” the Education Committee by dedicating one of its strongest members, plus a talented chapter Fellow, to revitalizing the chapter. The Fellow became the president and the former education committee member became the vice president. In only two years, the chapter began winning awards and gaining notice and respect from the rest of the Society.

Trust your instincts. You know who your leaders are. Convince them to serve on the Administrative Council, and simplify the community’s operations to allow them to focus their time and energy on constructing the foundation.

Document Your Values, Mission, and Goals

*The key to the ability to change is a changeless sense of who you are,
what you are about, and what you value.*
Stephen R. Covey

At your first (or next) Administrative Council meeting, use your leaders’ creativity and foresight to agree on and *document* what you see as your community’s values, mission, and goals.

Values

Values are the first things to consider because everything else is based on them. Your collective values are those concepts in which you have an emotional investment. They may include:

- Caring
- Ethical behavior
- Integrity
- Respect for one another
- Fiscal responsibility
- Community service
- Open, honest communications
- A diverse, unified team.

The possibilities are infinite. It all depends upon what is important to your community. Once you establish your values, you will find that every time you face a tough decision all you have to do is remind yourself of your community's values and the solution becomes clear.

Our STC community recently conducted a survey of our membership and distilled our core values to these six:

- Caring
- Education
- Excellence
- Teamwork
- Volunteerism
- Vision.

Our community's detailed Values Statement is provided as **Appendix B**.

Mission

Every organization has a *mission*, a purpose, a reason for being. A good mission statement should accurately explain (at a high level) why your community exists and what it hopes to achieve in the future. It should be developed in a brief paragraph free of jargon and slang. An effective mission statement must resonate with your members. It should inspire support and ongoing commitment. As a minimum, it should answer three key questions:

- What are the opportunities or needs that we exist to address?
- What are we doing to realize these opportunities and address these needs?
- What values guide us?

You can find much more information about developing a mission statement, including examples, on the Internet.

Goals

Goals should be developed very early in the community year (if not before), and they should be examined and renewed every year. In the beginning, make your community's goals simple, attainable, and measurable. You've heard a lot about the value of establishing personal, financial, family, career, and other types of goals. It's important to have clear goals to keep you and your members focused and energized. As Yankees Hall of Fame catcher and New York Mets coach Yogi Berra said, "If you don't know where you're going, you could end up someplace else." Uh, right...

Document Basic Bylaws

Basic research is what I am doing when I don't know what I am doing.
Wernher von Braun

Again, STC's *Community Handbook* contains details about developing *bylaws*, including the minimum sections that you should include. Your bylaws are another important ingredient in your community's foundation and should be reexamined at least every other year to ensure they remain supportive of your growing, dynamic chapter or SIG.

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

Think like a wise man but communicate in the language of the people.
William Butler Yeats

When things go wrong, when it seems like the people around you have become defensive, overly sensitive, or burned out, many times the cause can be traced to a lack of basic, open, meaningful communication. The essence of true communication is the ability to transmit information, thoughts, and ideas so that they are satisfactorily understood, but it is much more than that. Following are some principles of communication that are not always considered but that are crucial elements in your foundation:

- *Don't wait to communicate.* If you sense there is a relationship problem, especially among your leaders, drop everything (yes, *everything*), address it, and fix it *now*. Yes, it really *is* that important. Small problems can collect and suddenly become very large before you realize what's happening. By that time, the damage is done. It is far easier to address small problems when they occur than try to heal bruised egos or shattered trust later. Communicate *now* and often!
- *Communicate with respect.* Everyone brings something different to your community and leadership team, which makes it crucial to listen respectfully to his or her ideas and opinions and not become an "idea assassin." How do you feel when someone says things to you like, "That will never work." "Wrong again, Mike!" "That's not the way we do things around here." Everyone has something valuable to offer—*everyone*. They should always be encouraged, not *discouraged*.
- *Give each other the benefit of the doubt.* Remember, everyone is on the same team. They all care, and they are all doing their best. This means that everyone

deserves the benefit of the doubt, which will always preclude agitated responses and negative tones.

- *It's not possible to give too much praise, as long as the praise is authentic.*
- *"Do unto others..."* You know the rest.

Basic communication media that every community should strive for are a newsletter (or blog, wiki, etc.), an e-mail distribution, a website, and portals to the major social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

Newsletter or News Medium

The importance of regular communications with your members cannot be overemphasized. The good news is it's not that hard, and it does not need to be very time consuming. Regular communications can take one or more of the following forms. Only your imagination and resources limit other media.

- *Simple, unformatted newsletter*
New or rebuilding communities should consider minimizing the labor required to publish a newsletter. Consider a simple heading or banner that includes the STC logo, newsletter name, chapter name, and date. Follow that with separate, current news items that would be of interest to your members. Give each item its own descriptive heading. It doesn't matter if the newsletter ends after 1½ pages or even ¾ of a page. It's like writing someone a letter—just state the facts and send it. The important thing is to communicate, and keep your communications simple and concise.

Essential information to share is a review of the last meeting (so good that you are genuinely sorry you missed it) and the next meeting (so interesting you're already getting excited about it).

- *Emerging technologies*
Some communities use various emerging technologies to communicate with their members. As of this writing, these technologies include blogs and wikis and the major social media. Keep an eye on your STC publications to stay up to date on new communications technologies as they are developed.

Website

A simple website provides you with a means to:

- Archive community historical data and administrative materials
- Post newsletters, articles, and other documents for member viewing or downloading
- Relay important information to members at any time
- Post meeting schedules, leader contact information, meeting site directions, etc.
- Post links to other resources

- Establish portals to major social media such as Facebook and Twitter and maintain an active Facebook page. Veteran STC members are not all active on social media, but the young professionals who represent the future of the Society and our profession are. To survive as an organization (and a community), we must move with the times.

In a volunteer organization, web simplicity and maintenance are important. Your website should be designed with this in mind. Check in with the STC Community Affairs Committee (CAC) if you need advice about how to set up a website for your community.

Mailing List

A mailing list can simply be a distribution list containing your members' e-mail addresses. It can also take a more formal structure with a product specifically developed for this purpose. A mailing list allows you to distribute important information immediately and without having to wait for the next edition of your newsletter. Again, your CAC can provide helpful information on this topic. In addition, information regarding how to set up a mailing list is available by using a search engine.

Add Value

Quality in a product or service is not what the supplier puts in. It is what the customer gets out and is willing to pay for. A product is not quality because it is hard to make and costs a lot of money, as manufacturers typically believe. This is incompetence. Customers pay only for what is of use to them and gives them value. Nothing else constitutes quality.

Peter Drucker

Neither you nor your leaders can determine the value of a document, meeting, service, or anything else. Only the community members (your *customers*) can make that assessment. It really doesn't matter what you think. You are not the one you're here to serve. Just as you would with any technical communications project, gather requirements, create a draft, and test it with a few audience members. If you don't, you could be wasting precious resources on something your members don't value, don't care about, and will not support.

Member Survey

One good way of measuring customer value is by conducting a pre–chapter-year member-interest survey. The key here is to keep the survey as short and simple to complete and submit as you possibly can. Human nature dictates that because people's lives have become so busy, they have a tendency to ignore requests that require much of a time commitment. Some communities list general technical communications subject areas and ask members to either select the ones that interest them or number their top three choices. This is a good way to begin.

Now, here is the key for successfully creating meetings based on your member interest survey. It seems obvious, but *develop meetings based on member input*. One chapter's vice president related that he received only five responses to his first member interest survey (out of 100+ members). As a result, the leaders developed all chapter meetings for the year using those five suggestions. At the beginning of every chapter meeting, the

president told the members, “You asked for it in our interest survey, and here it is.” The response rate went up considerably the following year.

Networking

If your members are typical, human nature dictates that you will likely get a 10-15% response rate on your member interest survey. You should always try to supplement any sort of survey with personal networking. Talk to meeting attendees and even make a few telephone calls.

Important Note: Experience tells us that the members who are most likely to show up at a meeting regardless of the topic are the ones who will respond to the survey (with only a handful of exceptions). While you certainly want to keep your “regulars” happy, it is also important to find out what would attract the members who don’t usually attend. The only way you’ll find that is by calling them directly. Split up the phone list, ask for some volunteers, and make the calls. You should do this after the survey but before planning for the upcoming year; therefore, the survey and calls need to be coordinated and scheduled prior to the planning session.

The more member value you can identify, the greater the chances of success for your community.

Talking It Up

A great way to add perceived value for your members is by setting positive expectations with what some would call positive, consistent “public self-talk.”

Prior to every meeting, one former chapter president was known to stand in front of the room and proudly proclaim, “You are in the right place! Welcome to the [name] chapter, the fastest growing, most dynamic chapter in all of STC!” At first, those words were wishful thinking, but the more the members heard them, the more they believed them. It wasn’t long before they became one of the most highly decorated chapters in the Society.

The great thing about positive public self-talk is that it can be done in person or virtually. If your community handles some of its meetings and other communications virtually, ask your leaders to join you in making sure that your e-mails, newsletter, website, and other communication vehicles provide positive support, enthusiasm, and optimism.

Standardize Dates, Times, and Places

Time is what keeps things from happening all at once.

Winnie the Pooh

Standardizing dates, times, and places for your meetings, whether virtual or physical, is important. In an ideal world, if all meetings were held on the same day every month (e.g., the third Thursday), always started at the same time (e.g., 6:30 p.m.), and were always held at the same location, people could miss a few meetings but they would always know when and where they can come back. In addition, if you meet people at work (or elsewhere) who are interested in STC, you will always know when and where the next meeting will be and can easily invite them to attend. Also, if a person has a schedule conflict and can’t attend at the regularly scheduled time, in many cases he or she can

work on adjusting the non-STC part of the conflict so as to be able to attend chapter meetings.

Firm dates are also important to secure participation from a virtual audience. You want to instill the habit that they will attend on, say, the third Wednesday evening, even if you haven't reminded them (which, of course, you should).

Clearly, there could always be extenuating reasons why any or all of the three standardized elements may not be possible. For example, if a chapter is financially strapped and has an opportunity to move to a different facility that is available for no charge, moving may be the best thing to do. That being said, as much as possible try to be consistent with the date, time, and location. The result is usually a stable or growing membership.

Give Lots of Recognition

You can never have enough awards.

W.C. Wiese, STC Fellow

(See **Appendix C**, "Wiese's Laws for Volunteer Organizations")

All humans need to be recognized in a meaningful way for their efforts. Volunteer recognition acknowledges accomplishments, reinforces efforts, and conveys appreciation. It can be as easy as a smile and the words "Thank you!" Award ceremonies are another way to recognize efforts. Flowers and other tokens can also be used to express thanks. However it is done, recognition is an important component of any program.

Recognition provides individuals with an opportunity for self-assessment, reflection, and rewards to motivate and increase self-esteem. Recognition builds self-esteem and confidence and is an important component of volunteer retention. When volunteers feel appreciated and important, they are more likely to feel connected to the program and continue their involvement. Whether your community is largely virtual or geographical in nature, make recognition a priority.

For this topic, think in terms of *impromptu* recognition and *annual* appreciation.

Impromptu Recognition

We shouldn't wait until an annual event or when volunteers leave the organization to acknowledge their efforts. Along the way, we should thank them for the progress they are making. This appreciation may include a card during or after a particularly stressful time, or it might be a phone call to tell them that others have spoken highly of them. Recognition could also mean highlighting volunteers in the chapter newsletter.

Keep your eyes open for someone who becomes deserving of recognition, and be creative with that recognition. In one chapter, a volunteer stepped forward without being asked and took over the responsibilities of another volunteer who was unable to continue. Thinking this was a heroic thing to do, the chapter president created a new award: "Chapter Hero." The inexpensive award consisted of a transparent Lucite disk with the words "Chapter Hero" printed on the bottom so that it could be seen through the top.

Annual Appreciation

Because you have volunteers working with you, you understand the important role they play in successfully executing your chapter's mission and achieving your goals.

However, retention of volunteers is one of the most common challenges for nonprofit organizations. To keep your valued volunteers actively involved, recognition and appreciation are key!

One of the most widespread forms of formal volunteer recognition is the volunteer recognition party or luncheon. A well-planned meal can be an inspirational and motivational experience. Also, see "The Roof" section of this publication for information about an extremely successful "Active Member" program that you should consider implementing as your community grows.

The presentation of pins, certificates, awards, etc., needs to be organized well in advance. While certificates are certainly appreciated, if your budget allows consider purchasing appropriate three-dimensional objects such as plaques and trophies. Say, for example, you wish to acknowledge a rising star. Check online or at your local trophy shop. You'll be surprised how inexpensive an engraved Lucite shooting star is. Include a line item for "awards and recognition" as you establish your budget at the beginning of the chapter year, and keep your eyes open for ideas throughout the year.

In one chapter, an employment manager was presented an eagle statuette as a President's Award in the annual recognition dinner. The recipient had the eye-catching award placed in a trophy case in his employer's main lobby. The trophy became a source of pride for the company as many customers commented on the man's achievement.

A simple web search will yield an abundance of additional volunteer recognition ideas.

Success breeds success. A satisfied, happy volunteer tells three others; a dissatisfied, unhappy volunteer tells 13. Quality recognition programs help ensure continued and increased volunteer participation—the key to a successful non-profit organization.

Have Fun, but with a Business Attitude

When you have confidence, you can have a lot of fun.

And when you have fun, you can do amazing things.

Joe Namath

A mixture of learning, companionship, and fun make for a good meeting environment. One way to know you have accomplished this is when you see people hanging around after a meeting. You hear what Fellow W.C. Wiese refers to as a "clubhouse buzz."

In one chapter, the president always begins with a joke (usually a "groaner" pun) and (as previously mentioned) a version of the following statement:

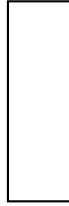
"Welcome to the [Name] Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication. You are in the right place! This is the fastest growing, most innovative chapter in all of STC!" By consistently keeping the excitement and enthusiasm at a high level, you provide an atmosphere that leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy: a belief that comes true because we are acting as if it is already true.

A Business Mindset

Some new leaders have a great deal of difficulty disciplining people because “They are my friends.” It is important from the very beginning to establish a business attitude when it comes to your STC responsibilities. If, for example, your committee members are missing meetings, they should be replaced. **Do what you would do if you owned a commercial business.** If employees don’t show up for work, one solution is to let them go. *It is okay to “fire” volunteers.* You would use more diplomacy with volunteers (and probably wouldn’t use the word “fire”), but you still have to do what’s right for your “business” (i.e., your chapter).

We want our meetings to be enjoyable but to have a clear professional benefit. Potential star members will quickly determine whether their time is being wasted by amateur entertainers or whether the meeting content and contacts will make them more successful as technical communicators.

The Walls



Leadership is the challenge to be something more than average.

Jim Rohn

Once you have your chapter's foundation solidly in place, that's all you need to run an average organization—if that's all you want. The vocabulary.com website defines average as follows:

“If something is average, it's ordinary and not very special. You might say a movie was *average* if you thought it was just okay. Lacking special distinction, rank, or status; commonly encountered.”

Certainly, average chapters require much less effort to maintain once you have established a solid foundation. It's a choice you make that may be dictated by the volunteer resources you have available. On the other hand, maybe average isn't good enough for you. This chapter (“The Walls”) and the next (“The Roof”) provide proven examples of some of the things you can do to rise above the average crowd and into the rarefied atmosphere of Bronze, Silver, Gold, or Platinum communities (see Community Achievement Awards below).

Model Successful Organizations

Success and average don't have nothing to do with each other.

Eric Thomas

A very successful tactic to use when working to improve your chapter is modeling successful organizations. Take some time to research “successful” chapters. Any number of indicators can reflect a successful STC community:

- Size
- Awards
- Number of members working at Society level
- Number of Fellows and Associate Fellows
- Presentations at the annual conference
- Innovative programs adopted at the Society level.

Call the Society office at 1+ (703) 522-4114 and find out which communities they consider to be the strongest and most successful.

If there is any way to arrange it, the best thing to do is to either attend a chapter meeting or invite the model chapter's principal members to lunch and "pick their brains." If the organization you are contacting is not close geographically, such contacts can be made virtually.

Once you have identified the most successful chapter(s) and what they do to be considered successful, it's up to you, in conjunction with your leadership team, to pick and choose which of their practices are best suited for your chapter. You will need to make the right decisions regarding which changes to implement.

Important Note: Once again, your business acumen comes into play when deciding to add additional functions to your chapter. *Do not add a function unless a member is willing to step up and be responsible for it.* The same thinking holds true for any and all new chapter functions that are considered in the future. (See Wiese's Rules in **Appendix C.**) The ideal is when the effort matches the volunteer's personal skills or motivation. You want to find someone for whom the job is easy to do, not impossibly hard. If you can, find the "Rudy" who wants to play. (Don't know Rudy? Learn about him here: [Rudy Ruettiger](#)).

Use Positive Self-Talk Publicly

Chapter meetings have agendas, but realize that you can—and should—go off-agenda to make positive comments about the chapter, its volunteers, and its programs. For example, "You know, with our new members filling key roles, we are bound to be in contention for Gold Community Award this year!" "Don't you just love this chapter?" "With this kind of enthusiasm, the sky is the limit!" "We are already becoming a chapter that others emulate!" "Great job, people!"

Be a Cheerleader

Decide to be a cheerleader at every opportunity. Keep the excitement going for both the chapter and individual performers. Lead a round of applause at meetings when an outstanding individual performance is recognized. Leaving the stage at the annual conference with a chapter award? Chant your chapter's name with enthusiasm!

One particular evening when his chapter was having a combined meeting with the student technical communication club at a local university, a chapter president noted that the meeting attendance was especially high. After calling his Administrative Council together outside of the meeting room, he looked every person directly in the eyes as he said, "Do you see the size of that crowd out there? That is because of *you*! Now go out there, see what you did, and feel proud of yourself!" With that, everyone formed a circle, stacked their hands, and chanted the chapter's name. It was a magical moment when the adrenalin rush filled each person with an overflow of energy and pride. Take every opportunity to have these special moments.

Connect with Academe and Stay Connected

One of the most important things, perhaps *the* most important thing, you will ever do as a chapter leader is to establish a strong connection with academe in your community. Whether it's a university, community college, trade school, technical school, or high

school, make it one of your highest priorities to stay in touch with students, teachers, professors, principals, and whomever else you can. Stress the win-win situation that will result from such a relationship, and create opportunities for the relationship to grow and prosper.

Student Mentoring Program

To further ensure the success of future technical communicators, the Florida Chapter has teamed with the Future Technical Communicators (FTC) club at the nearby University of Central Florida to develop a unique and highly successful student mentoring program, the purpose of which is to further ensure students' success after graduation by preparing them for job search, placement, and career development. This program is being emulated throughout the Society. Students benefit from exposure to the "real" business world, thereby increasing their chances of securing a job that's suited for them. In turn, the chapter benefits because many of the students become the chapter leaders of the future.

In addition to academe, also important are the relationships you can form with local businesses that can underwrite program costs and scholarships and provide meeting space. The partnership makes STC more real in the eyes of businesses and can raise the profile of members employed there who are seen as actively working to increase their skills and value.

Once you have established these relationships, *especially the one with academe*, give them your strong support every year thereafter. Never allow the relationships to weaken. As a leader, make this your primary responsibility. It's just that important.

Create a Strategic Plan

What are your goals for your chapter in the coming year? You say you have no specific plans? You will just be addressing things as they come up? What a waste of your people resources! How inspired will they be to give their valuable time to your chapter?

On the other hand, do you want to increase your chapter membership by 10%? Do you want to create a student scholarship competition? Do you want to make yourself better known in your community? Do you want to start a student FTC (Future Technical Communicators) club at the local college? Whatever you choose as important initiatives will be concrete activities that your members can get behind and get excited about. They now have a reason (or reasons) to support your chapter and create a source of pride.

Strategic planning is an organizational management activity used to set priorities, focus energy and resources, strengthen operations, ensure members are working toward common goals, establish agreement around intended outcomes/results, and assess and adjust the organization's direction in response to a changing environment. It is a disciplined effort that produces fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what a chapter is, who it serves, what it does, and why it does it—with a focus on the future. Effective strategic planning articulates not only where a chapter is going and the actions needed to make progress but also how it will know if it is successful.

Setting your chapter's goals can be exciting and motivating. It gives members purpose, sets clear intentions, makes members feel productive, and creates the feeling of moving forward.

Publicize Your Plan

Be sure to publicize your strategic plan in your newsletter and on your website. Being clear (and public) about your goals gives members an added incentive to achieve them. Announce your goals at the beginning of the chapter year and review them at your year-end wrap-up meeting. Be honest about what you have achieved and where you fell short (and why). After reviewing the prior year's goals, proclaim what they will be in the coming year. Make yourself accountable to your customers (i.e., members and guests).

Consider Adding More Committees

As your chapter grows and more personnel resources become available, consider forming additional committees in support of your especially important initiatives. **REMEMBER**, as badly as you think you need a certain committee, do not form it unless someone is willing to take an active role in leading that committee. Current leaders have enough to do. They risk burnout if they take on anything else. If that happens, you may lose them altogether.

In addition to strengthening existing committees, consider forming the following new, especially crucial, committees with your new volunteers:

Newsletter

Formatted newsletters are “fancier,” more polished than basic newsletters. These are the ones you would enter in a newsletter competition. Some of the elements a formatted newsletter may include are a well-designed banner, a multiple-column layout, color, photos, and, if you publish online, hypertext links. If your editor is willing to take the time to produce a formatted newsletter, he/she is also likely to expand the content of a basic newsletter by adding elements such as regular columns, in-depth professional development features, and human interest articles. A first-class newsletter is not only informative; it also gives chapter members who contribute—including students—the opportunity to gain a valuable professional publications credit.

Membership

The Membership Committee is responsible for recruiting prospective members, ensuring the retention of current members, and helping the chapter achieve steady and healthy growth.

Public Relations

Promote the chapter's programs, prominent speakers, and noteworthy events through media outreach in an effort to secure coverage that helps to attract participation and to positively position the chapter within the local professional community. Publicize chapter activities and member accomplishments.

Program Committee

The quality and effectiveness of the chapter's program series is the key to attracting and retaining members. When young professionals receive answers and training that make a difference for them in the workplace, they understand and begin to communicate the value of their STC membership.

Should you elect to form a program committee, the chapter vice president is the logical—though not the only—candidate to manage it.. Along with the vice president (or another manager), program committee members are responsible for organizing a series of excellent programs for the benefit of chapter members. Programs can include educational content, networking, socializing, or all three. Responsibilities include budgeting, organizing, and implementing an effective program to enhance the professional development of chapter members.

The Roof



You've done it! Your chapter has a solid foundation that has given your leaders the confidence to construct some walls. Your organization is starting to be known in segments of the Society. People think of you and your volunteers as up-and-comers. Good things are starting to happen.

Honors

As your chapter leadership continues to evolve, keep your eyes open for those who are more heavily involved not only in local chapter activities but also in inter-chapter support, annual Summit participation, and involvement at the Society level. Become familiar with the requirements for Associate Fellow and Fellow nominations (on the stc.org web site) and be aware of members who qualify for nomination.

Chapters that boast a number of Associate Fellows and Fellows necessarily have other high-quality senior members. Just as you cannot be the Super Bowl MVP unless your team wins, neither can you achieve a high STC honor without a strong supporting cast of members. Individual honors are indicative of a strong chapter.

Apply for a Community Award

When you have standout individual performers, you have a standout chapter. It's time to enter the competition for special community awards. You may have noticed that no kind of award or honor was mentioned in the "Foundation" section. You will want to focus strictly on "foundational" elements in the beginning and not allow yourself or your leaders to be distracted by anything else. When your chapter has a solid foundation, only then should you seek individual and collective recognition.

Important Note: Just because your chapter has earned the highest STC chapter accolade doesn't mean you can rest on your laurels.

When you rest on your laurels, they immediately collapse beneath you.

Anonymous

Chapters are very dynamic. Members leave and new members join. People have accidents or illnesses that require hospital stays. Sometimes people's interests change, and other times they feel burned out and simply don't renew their membership. You must be vigilant and always aware of chapter needs. It is just *so* much easier to fix something when it first appears than later when it becomes a full-blown problem.

Competitions

Each year some STC communities sponsor competitions through which technical communicators have the opportunity to receive recognition for their work. Look around the Society for communities holding competitions of various types. In addition, STC

recognizes excellence in technical communication and outstanding service to the Society with its honors, awards, and competitions programs.

Competitions may seem daunting at times, but they actually come with several benefits:

- They force you to get out of your comfort zone.
- They motivate you to become more creative.

By encouraging members to participate in competitions, perhaps even starting a competition of your own, you keep them motivated and engaged.

Community Achievement Awards

In addition to local competitions, the Society recognizes the outstanding accomplishments of Special Interest Groups (SIGs), professional chapters, and student chapters in achieving the Society's goals through a wide range of programs and activities. Tracking chapter activities that qualify you to submit an application for one or more of these awards can be time-consuming, but it is well worth the effort.

If you choose to apply for a Community Achievement Award (CAA) you should appoint a member to track your activities. If you have enough resources, it would benefit this effort to form a committee. This person or committee must be in place prior to the start of the calendar year, since typically the Society awards are based on accomplishments for this period of time.

The more effort you put into this initiative, the better your chapter's chances of being selected to receive one or more of these accolades. They are a tremendous source of pride for your members.

Additional Committees

There is no limit to the number of committees you can have as long as you have enough dedicated resources. Also, there is no restriction on the subject matter. One of the other possibilities is a Chapter History committee. Be creative and examine the kinds of committees that would be of greatest benefit to your chapter. By the same token, maintain an awareness of a committee's value to your chapter. Determine when a committee is no longer needed or whether it should be restructured. Here are some possibilities for new committees:

- Scholarship
- Competition
- Professional Recognition (Society-level and local awards)
- Summit Planning
- Bylaws
- Web
- Social Media
- Virtual Meetings

- Social Get-Togethers.

Committees can be a way to involve new members, especially when the work matches their interests and can beef up a résumé or portfolio.

Community Outreach

Be sensitive to the needs of the community and mobilize support efforts as appropriate. STC members are particularly suited for supporting community educational needs. When a technical communications professor lost all of his books due to flooding caused by a hurricane, one chapter collected replacement books as a temporary measure to allow him to continue teaching.

How many people in your area are illiterate? If you don't know, find out. Is there a literacy program in your neighborhood? Either join one or start one of your own.

Some STC members teach classes on a regular basis, supporting schools with specialized training that would otherwise not be available.

There are many opportunities to put your skills to work for the benefit of your community. Show people what a special organization you have, and the next time a member is job hunting, he or she will come to the interview preceded by an excellent reputation that was established by the community.

Society-Level Work

A great way of developing technical communications skills is to volunteer for Society-level activities. Also, you must have Society-level experience to qualify for Associate Fellow and Fellow honors. Contact the Society office and volunteer for activities for which you qualify and can add value. Possibilities include:

- Judging publications competitions
- Assuming Annual Summit responsibilities
- Serving on a Society-level committee.

Everyone benefits from Society-level work—the volunteer, the chapter, and the Society itself.

Active Member Program

A program worth considering for implementation in your chapter is the Active Member program. This program, developed by the Florida Chapter, has been adopted by many chapters Society-wide. Points are awarded to chapter members for being actively involved in the chapter by:

- Attending a chapter meeting
- Being a member of the Administration Council
- Serving on a committee

- Writing an article for the chapter newsletter
- Presenting a program at a chapter meeting
- Serving as a mentor to a student member

The Active Member program manager determines which activities qualify for a point or points and tracks members' participation in those activities as well as their attendance at chapter meetings and Administrative Council meetings. At the end of the chapter year, the members with the highest number of points receive an attractive shirt with "Active Member, Florida Chapter" embroidered on the front. The Active Member program has proved to be a highly successful and motivational initiative.

Leadership Retreats

No matter whether your chapter is large or small, regardless of whether you are still solidifying your foundation or are adding a roof, holding a leadership retreat is a great way to start a new chapter year. Begin by finding a place where your team can have complete privacy and not be interrupted. Start by establishing your goals for the upcoming year. It is vital that the chapter leaders work together to achieve common goals and understand the part they play in ensuring the chapter's success.

A retreat is an opportunity to engender creativity—a time to remove your nose from the grindstone and look to the hills, a chance to think about what ought to be and devise steps to get there.

Most people work hard in their organizations and want their work to be meaningful. They want to be involved and work toward an ideal. Even in the face of conflicting demands and increasing pressures, they need to see that what they do every day moves their organization or team in a desired direction.

Members of a volunteer organization, just like employees of a company, are more productive and motivated when they feel a greater sense of involvement in establishing their organization's goals and ideals. A carefully planned retreat motivates your chapter leaders because it enlists their creative participation in setting goals and contributing to decisions. Just as important, effective retreats produce concrete approaches for tackling long-standing and difficult organizational problems.

And last but certainly not least, retreats are fun! After all, if you can't have fun in a volunteer organization, why join it?

If your chapter "takes a break" between chapter years, that is the perfect time to hold a retreat. Your team will emerge with a renewed sense of purpose and vigor that will get the new year off to a solid start.

Your Completed House (?)

Life is unpredictable, and you never know what's coming next. Don't ever get too comfortable. Always be ready to change.

Anonymous

Continuing with the house analogy, is a house ever really completed? It could always use a fresh coat of paint. What about that brown spot in the grass in the front yard? Is your welcome mat in good shape? What about “curb appeal?” Are first impressions positive? And hey, did you notice that crack in the foundation? Looks like it has gotten bigger.

As mentioned in the “Create a Strategic Plan” section, we live in very dynamic times. People come and go, attitudes are changing, and technology is advancing at breakneck speed. As a chapter leader, you are responsible for making sure your chapter programs are up-to-date and relevant. If members don't get the information they need to evolve with social and technological changes, they will find another source that will better serve them.

As previously mentioned, a pre-chapter-year “interest” survey is a good tool to keep up with member interests. Take an interest survey at the end of a chapter year and use it as the basis for planning your programs for the upcoming chapter year. Remain flexible to alter the schedule in case a new technology, discipline, or other game-changer suddenly appears.

Your House Is Unique

Nobody wants to live in a row of “cookie cutter” homes. A great leader wants the chapter to be successful and inspiring. Encourage your members to “think outside the box.” Thinking outside the box is more than just a business cliché. It means approaching problems in new, innovative ways; conceptualizing problems differently; and understanding your position in relation to events and other situations in a way you never thought of before. It's an interesting journey with opportunities to meet new people and grow friendships

Keep your perspective. Use what you have rather than despair about what you don't have. Success is relative, and anything your community achieves can make a difference for your members and future members.

In summary, every community, no matter how strong or weak, can thrive if it identifies its leaders, articulates its values, sets its goals, and performs regular “checkups” to evaluate how well it's doing and determine whether changes would bring improvement. Consider the health of your community as the product of volunteer commitment, realistic expectations, and the will to excel. And remember, your community is not alone; it is a part of the pre-eminent professional society for technical communicators. Take advantage of the resources offered by STC and success will follow.

Appendix A: What It Takes to Be a Leader

By Mike Murray, STC Fellow, Florida Chapter Past President

(Author's Note: If you are happy with the status quo and don't wish to explore your full potential, this article is not for you. Don't read it. Don't worry, nobody will know but you.)

I would absolutely *love* to be six years old again! When you're six, you can do *anything*, because nobody has told you that you will fail. Nobody has said that you'll never be a professional athlete, or a policeman, or the President of the United States. Nobody has told you that you can't build a rocket ship in your back yard and take it to the moon. Every six-year-old is in a position to fulfill his or her maximum potential in life. What would you do if you knew for a fact that you could not fail?

If you read this article, internalize it, and apply it, I guarantee you will be much closer to achieving your full potential in life. You'll be more than a participant in life, you'll be a fully realized leader, and that's where you find your maximum potential. Interested? Here's how it's done. I'll keep it simple, because it *is*.

Have the guts to take the first step.

I should list the rest of my points as "See the first point," because everything else just naturally follows. This probably sounds a little obvious, but you can't get somewhere unless you start. The great thing about being an STC volunteer is that *you will not fail*. Whether you begin with a one-time, one-night effort or take on a year-long task, there are two things you'll have going for you:

- No experience is necessary.
- You'll get lots of training, encouragement, and support from your teammates.

At least 90% of what we fear never happens, and nothing is worse than wondering later in your life, "What could have been if only I had tried?"

Speak the truth. Consistently speak the truth rather than saying things just to please others.

Lead from the heart.

Leadership is about people. Get to know people individually, wear your heart on your sleeve, and don't be afraid to show your vulnerability. Genuinely care about other people, and develop the people around you.

Maintain high morals.

What you do speaks much more loudly than anything you could ever say. Strength of character is true power—people can feel it a mile away. Walk the talk, and stay aligned with your core values.

Be courageous.

Being courageous is just an extension of having the guts to take the first step. It takes courage to go against the flow, to be a visionary, to do what you think is right even though it may not be easy. Don't walk the path of least resistance: do what's right.

Build teams and create communities.

One of the main things people look for in their work is a sense of community. Leaders create organizations that foster human linkages and lasting friendships.

Deepen yourself.

Know yourself. Be aware of your weaknesses and play to your strengths. Transcend your fears.

Be a dreamer.

Great things are born from imagination. Dare to dream impossible dreams.

Commit to excellence rather than perfection.

No human being is perfect. We are all a work in progress. Commit yourself to excellence in everything you do. Keep pushing the envelope and raising your standards.

Leave a legacy.

Success is wonderful, but significance is even better. Contribute. Leave a mark on the people around you. Build your legacy by adding value to everyone you deal with, and leave the world a better place in the process.

Now, aren't you glad you wouldn't accept the status quo?

How different our lives are when we really know what is deeply important to us, and keeping that picture in mind, we manage ourselves each day to be and to do what really matters most.

Stephen R. Covey

Time to get busy!

Appendix B: Values Statement: Florida STC Chapter

Chapter's Core Values Identified

Led by Fellow Mike Murray, the Florida Chapter Administrative Council has identified the six core values that best represent how we perform work and conduct ourselves. They are:

- **Caring**
- **Education**
- **Excellence**
- **Teamwork**
- **Vision**
- **Volunteering**

NOTE: In the write-ups for each core value, you will notice words in quotation marks. These are additional core values that were suggested and determined to be covered by our final six selections. The write-ups explain the thinking that went into zeroing in on the final six.

Definitions are from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/>.

Caring

Today, give yourself permission to be outrageously kind, irrationally warm, and improbably generous. I promise it will be a blast.

Sasha Dichter

Definition: Feeling and exhibiting concern and empathy for others.

The Florida Chapter is more than a community. We are an STC “family.” We “fly wing” for each other when life takes a shot at us.

Education

Anyone who stops learning is old, whether at 2 or 80. Anyone who keeps learning stays young. The greatest thing in life is to keep your mind young.

Moshe Arens

Definition: The process of receiving or giving systematic instruction, especially at a school or university.

We value education because each of us learns and grows throughout life. Some education is formal, but much is gained through life experience and the guidance and examples set

by others. We learn from one another and we pass along our knowledge and values to those around us.

The hallmark of our Education core value is our flourishing student “Mentoring” program, which we emphasize in our interactions, our meetings, and our publications. Education and “Teamwork” provide us with “Opportunity” to advance in our careers.

Excellence

The quality of a person's life is in direct proportion to their commitment to excellence, regardless of their chosen field of endeavor.

Vince Lombardi

Definition: The quality of being outstanding or extremely good.

Excellence has always been a primary core value for our community, so much so that Excellence is featured in our *Memo to Members* newsletter, beginning with what it is and ending with how we maintain it. Excellence implies that we take “Pride” in what we do.

Embracing Excellence became a chapter “Commitment” many years ago. Always striving for Excellence says that we value the “Achievement” of our goals and initiatives. Our commitment to Excellence is evident in our Society recognitions: an unequalled record of nine Chapter of Distinction and two Community-of-the-Year awards in the Society’s annual Community Achievement Awards.

Teamwork

The strength of the team is each individual member. The strength of each member is the team.

Phil Jackson

Definition: The combined action of a group of people, especially when effective and efficient.

Teamwork implies “Cooperation” within the team to reach your goals. For us to have successful teamwork, we must be “Inclusive” in our membership and we must “Respect” the opinions of others. Values such as “Respect,” “Inclusivity,” “Teamwork,” “Spirit,” “Pride,” etc. create an atmosphere of “Fellowship.” Collectively, they generate the warm “buzz” of clubhouse camaraderie that accompanies our monthly programs, our Administrative Council meetings, and our annual Leadership Retreat.

Vision

The problems of the world cannot possibly be solved by skeptics or cynics whose horizons are limited by the obvious realities. We need men who can dream of things that never were and ask “why not?”

John F. Kennedy

Definition: An aspirational description of what an organization would like to achieve or accomplish in the mid-term or long-term future. It is intended to serve as a clear guide for choosing current and future courses of action.

It takes Vision to be “Innovative.” Over the years, our STC community has been a Pacesetter for the Society with our “Innovative” initiatives such as the student Mentoring program, the Active Membership program, and more. Our Leadership Development Program (LDP), launched in January 2018, adds to that legacy.

Volunteering

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead

Definition: An altruistic activity where an individual or group provides services for no financial gain to benefit another person, group, or organization.

Volunteering is “Service” and shows that we are in touch with local, indeed international needs, which is why we Volunteer. If our goals are inclusive of our community (as they should be), and if our Volunteering extends beyond our chapter (as it should), and if we really “Care” about the people we serve, then we have the suggested value of “Connecting” covered as well.

How We Use Our Core Values

There will come a time, as there always does, when we are faced with a difficult decision. Don't go for days or weeks, as we sometimes do, talking and thinking, trying to make the “right” decision. Just take the time to refocus on our core values, and the answer will quickly become obvious. Core values are what support the vision, shape the culture, and reflect what an organization values. They are the essence of our identity.

This above all: to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man.

William Shakespeare (*Hamlet*)

Appendix C: Wiese's Laws for Volunteer Organizations

- If nobody wants to do it, maybe it doesn't need to be done.
- If you're an officer, make it look like you're having fun.
- Avoid burnout—one year and out.
- Help every volunteer give the gifts that are easy for them to give.
- You can't have enough awards.

Appendix D: Resources

- Society for Technical Communication Website (www.stc.org)
- Florida STC Chapter Website (stc-orlando.org)
- *STC Community Handbook* (login at www.stc.org and go to Member Center > Leadership Resources)