

* EDUCATION



Stages in the Life of a Student Organization:

Preparing Student Leaders for Managing the Cycle

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Whether you are a seasoned veteran who has been leading organizations for years or a new student just joining your first student organization, we hope we will be able to teach you some new tricks to be able to maximize your organization's effectiveness by following and understanding the various stages student organizations experience.

Although each organization varies as to when their year begins and when it ends, the stages they go through are often very similar. At our school, organizations typically select new leadership and transition to new leadership during the spring of the academic year. This timeline gives them only a brief period before summer vacation in which the new leadership can take over and begin the task of planning for the upcoming year. Consequently, it is very important for organizations to be prepared for the transition so as to maximize the amount of information that is successfully transferred.

We will detail the four stages an organization experiences, but remember that regardless of when you make your leadership transition, these stages apply to your organization.

Stage One: Ground Yourself

As you begin your organizational year, it is important to ground yourself by reviewing the mission, vision and any historical records for your organization. This can often lead to a deeper understanding of your organization's history and accomplishments. Once you have gotten a sense of where you as a leader would like to see your organization go, it is time to get the rest of your organization together to discuss this and begin to form a list of expectations and goals for the year.

Group member input is very important to ensure a fully engaged student organization. If one leader of an executive team sets goals and objectives that do not correspond with the majority, it will be very difficult for the membership to give 100% to accomplishing the goals. Whereas, if the leadership makes an effort to incorporate the ideas from the membership, it is much more likely that accomplishing the goals and objectives will be a priority to all involved.

It is important to remember to make the goals for your organization SMART. There are many different versions of what the letters stand for but each can be beneficial to consider as you set goals for your organization:

- S - Specific, significant, stretching
- M - Measurable, meaningful, motivational
- A - Agreed upon, attainable, achievable, acceptable, action-oriented
- R - Realistic, relevant, reasonable, rewarding, results-oriented
- T - Time-based, timely, tangible, trackable

As you begin the year, think about the roles members of your organization play. There are a variety of formal and informal leadership roles you can encourage organizational members to take depending on each person's individual strengths and weaknesses. Some of these roles may be event or project specific and others may be part of the overall functioning of the organization. It is important to remember that it is not too early to begin looking for/grooming potential leadership for upcoming years.

Stages	1	2	3	4
Time of Year	April - September	October - November	December-January	February-March
Leaders Responsibilities	Ground Yourself: clarify vision, mission, goals, and roles, and begin planning major events, trips, projects, etc.	Stay Organized: assess meeting management, communicate regularly and implement organizational tips	Re-Evaluate: reflect on first semester, revise expectations and goals, and recognize efforts and achievements	Finish Strong: finalize projects, write end-of-year report, select, train, and transition new leadership

Stage Two: Stay Organized

Now that your organization is up and running, it is important to take a look at how you are going to keep it moving forward and assess your effectiveness as a leader. Some of the top struggles we see with new leaders surround staying organized and running effective meetings.

It is important to think about how (or IF) you are organizing your materials early in the year before things get out of control and too difficult to manage. Hopefully, the leader before you handed everything off to you in one organized folder or binder (see information on the end-of-year report below) and all you have to do is keep it updated. Unfortunately, that is not typically the case. But if you follow through with some of the information we share with you here, you can change this pattern for future leaders of your organization.

To give you some ideas, we have developed a list of organizational tips (see sidebar on Page 25) you can use to keep yourself and your organizational materials organized.

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While you are going through the process of getting organized, this is also the perfect time to begin to assemble your end-of-year report we will describe later.

The next thing to determine is if you are running effective meetings. Low attendance at your meetings can be a sign your members do not feel your meetings are worth their time. This can be caused by a number of factors. We have asked organization leaders what makes a good meeting and have included some of their answers below.

Asking your organization members to brainstorm answers to the following questions and then compare your answers to ours would be one way for you to get beneficial feedback for guiding your own meeting strategy.

- **What makes a good meeting?**
 - Have a clear purpose for the meeting—if you don't need to meet, it is okay to cancel sometimes.
 - Have an agenda!
 - Select an appropriate physical setting for the meeting. Meetings heavy on business may not be appropriate for a lounge space just as meetings focusing on building relationships may not be best in a classroom setting.
 - Leave time for questions and wrap-up.
 - Start and end on time.

- **What can a leader do to effectively lead a meeting?**
 - Delegate someone to take meeting minutes.
 - Ask for members to participate.
 - Ask group members what they want out of the meeting (ahead of time).
 - Keep members on task, while allowing some digression.
- **What about a meeting would encourage a member to come back (to a second meeting!)?**
 - Remember the three things students look for from their participation in your student organization. If you can do a little of each during your meeting, it should help everyone be more satisfied.
 1. Tasks—they want to have something to do/ accomplish.
 2. Relationships—they want to meet people and build relationships.
 3. Growth—they want to learn something new and be able to use it in the future.
 - Shake things up once in awhile! Change location, bring treats, play games and have fun.
- **What should a leader do after a meeting?**
 - Follow up with members to confirm assignments or roles.
 - E-mail minutes promptly.

Stage Three: Re-Evaluate

Now that you have reached the mid-point of the year as leader, it is important to take a step back and reflect on what you have accomplished and what remains ahead. Taking time to refocus will help you and your organization renew your motivation to accomplish your remaining goals and objectives and will help provide momentum as you move on to your final tasks.

Here are a few questions you might consider:

- What was your biggest accomplishment last semester? Biggest disappointment?
- How often does your group meet? Is this often enough or too often?
- How do you communicate with members? Do you feel this method is sufficient?
- Do you know how and when you are going to pick next year's leaders? Have you encouraged people to consider these positions?
- What information from last semester are you going to put in your end-of-year report?
- Do you need to reconsider your goals and expectations?
- How are you recognizing and motivating your members?

Recognition and motivation of members is often overlooked. Many articles have been written on this topic, so we will not address it here, but it is an important responsibility for you as a leader. Often, we see organizations begin to lose members during the second half of the year. Enhancing your recognition and motivation efforts will reduce the likelihood of this occurring and should increase the odds that your membership will finish as energized as it began.

Stage Four: Finish Strong!

Once final projects have been completed (or perhaps while you are still working on them), it becomes time to engage yourself in one last, but important, task you must complete as an organizational leader: leadership transition.

Leadership selection is an important process that should begin long before applications are released and interviews scheduled. As we discussed during the mid-year re-evaluation, organizational leadership should begin looking for those potential leaders early in the year and begin to encourage them to take on additional responsibilities.

Now that you have reached the selection time, the biggest factor that impacts many students' decisions to apply is the personal invitation (not a group e-mail). There are many ways you can personally invite another student to apply. Sitting down and having a conversation that encourages them to apply or writing a personal note to share why you think they would make a good leader will likely have a positive impact on their decision-making process.

Once you have your new leadership selected, it becomes your job to train (or assist your advisor in training) your successor. One of the easiest ways to do this is by having complete records of the year's activities and other necessary resources all collected in one place. Here are some suggested items you could cover in an end-of-year report, but you'll need to tailor it to your organization's specific needs.

End-of-Year Report:

Organization Basics

- Organization constitution and bylaws
- Mission, purpose statement, or philosophy of organization
- Goals for organization
- Elections for positions
- Position descriptions and responsibilities
- Committee descriptions (if applicable)
- Calendar of programs/events held throughout year

Organization Members and Supplies

- Member list
- Location of meetings
- Frequency of meetings
- Expectations for members
- Location/description of any resources (paper, markers, scissors, etc.)
- If you have an office, a list of what is normally kept in it
- Description of any resources stored and where they are located

Programming

- List of programs/events
- Advertising

Organizational Tips

Remember: Keeping yourself organized can require extra time and effort up front. If you take the extra time, however, it will pay off in the long run.

Separate your personal/professional space:

Put your student leader/group materials in a portable file case, a binder or a designated desk drawer.

Declutter:

Once a week, file papers, throw away unnecessary papers, neaten your workspace and get back in touch with your materials.

Keep a "bag of tricks":

Successful student leaders are ready at a moment's notice to lead their group. In their "bag of tricks," there might be:

1. A folder or binder in which to keep paperwork organized
2. A group activity or icebreaker they can use if there are new members or if the group needs a break
3. A way of telling time when you're not near a clock
4. A calendar (even better—a calendar that lists major campus events taking place that year)
5. A campus directory
6. The group's membership/contact list
7. Frequently needed information (phone numbers, websites, account/budget information, etc.)

Organize your workspace:

Separate your student leader/group materials into three categories:

1. **Frequently used**—These would be materials you would need daily. Keep these in easy reach of your desk/computer or perhaps posted on a bulletin board.
2. **Somewhat used**—Materials you need for weekly meetings or monthly events. Keep these in file folders at your desk, or maybe in a desk drawer near your computer.
3. **Hardly used**—These are materials you keep for reference. Store these in a desk drawer or cupboard or maybe even in a storage area.

Purge:

Learn to throw things away—it's okay! Toss items you know can be found online or items you haven't used in more than a year. If you think you MIGHT need them later, put them all in one space and put them in storage. (Don't forget to label the box, though.)

Label your file folders:

It is easy and will save you lots of time! Use file labels you can put in the printer, or simply write on the tab with a thin, black marker.

Keep a list for recurring tasks/events:

Does your organization/group have re-occurring activities or tasks? Make checklists for these so no details are missed. This would work well for groups where different members are taking on the responsibilities of these recurring events/tasks each time.

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- List of who planned the events
- Evaluations of events' success
- Supplies needed and whether they were enough
- List of any traditional events your organization offers every year
- List of events that are in the process of being planned for next year

Budget

- Explanation of how the budget was organized/recorded
- Explanation of how money was spent
- Ending budget balances

Other Resources

- Contact list of important people or frequently needed information (websites!)
- Historical records of the organization
- Copies of meeting agendas and minutes
- Student organization leader handbook

Taking time to refocus will help you and your organization renew your motivation to accomplish your remaining goals and objectives and will help provide momentum as you move on to your final tasks.

Once you have completed this report, you should give a paper copy to the new leaders and advisor, leave one in the office (if applicable), and save an electronic copy on a network drive (if applicable).

Training the new leader can be as simple as going through this comprehensive record of your past year and summarizing the lessons you have learned and allowing the new leader to ask questions about things that may not be clear. Ideally, if you are willing to continue to assist during the upcoming year, you might leave your contact information so that as questions arise, your successor knows where to go for answers.

The legacy of your leadership will certainly be affected by how you manage your organization throughout the year, but how you manage the transition to new leadership at the end of your term may have an even broader impact. All too often, we see leaders cut and run without passing anything along to their successors. When this happens, organization leaders make the same mistakes year after year and they are never really able to move forward.

If you are able to successfully transition your organization through these stages and hand a well-written end-of-year report to the new leadership, you will likely leave them better prepared to move the organization forward.

Summary

At the end of the fourth stage, you have successfully transitioned the new leadership and the cycle begins again. We hope we have been helpful in educating you about the stages in the life of an organization and have given you a few tips to successfully ground yourself, stay organized, re-focus and finish strong.

(Authors' note: This article is adapted from Concordia College's LeadNow™ Leadership Development Program.)

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