

CHAPTER 1: REACTIVATING OR STARTING A YOUNG LAWYERS ORGANIZATION

Starting or reactivating a young lawyer organization can be a complicated and overwhelming task. Anyone who has attempted such a task has quickly discovered that this can become an incredibly time consuming effort. Yet, the benefits of an active young lawyer organization to the community and its young lawyers will far outweigh the initial difficulties borne by the “incorporating group”. This article provides some suggestions and guidelines for reactivating or starting a young lawyer organization.

A. History - The first item to consider in starting or reactivating a young lawyer organization is whether the community has had a young lawyer organization in the past. If a young lawyer organization previously existed in the area, you should consider why it failed, what success the former organization had, and whether the new organization will face similar problems and situations. You should also discover the form (i.e. division, section, committee) in which the previous young lawyer organization existed as this will assist you as re-form that organization within your local bar.

Otherwise, you should ask why no young lawyer organization has ever existed in the community and consider whether those reasons still exist. Factors that prevented the formation of an organization in the past, such as a low number of young lawyers (or active/participating young lawyers), may have changed over time.

Through a historical review, you may be able to avoid past failures and also avoid reinventing the wheel.

B. Reasons - Before dedicating yourself to the considerable time and effort required operating a new young lawyer organization, you must thoroughly consider the reasons and justifications for having a young lawyer organization in your community. Do factors and needs exist in the community that will allow the organization to be successful? For example, is there a need for an organization to provide training for young lawyers or to provide an opportunity for young lawyers to network? If the senior bar is simply a social organization for very senior members of the bar, such a need may exist. Do young lawyers in the community have an opportunity to influence their profession through the senior bar? Is a portion of the legal community ignored or excluded, such as governmental attorneys or small firm attorneys? Do the young lawyers in the community want an excuse to get together for drinks or activities, such as participating in sport leagues? Do the young lawyers or the senior bar want to provide more service to the public? There are many reasons or justifications for having a young lawyer organization. You simply have to make sure that a sufficient reason exists to form a young lawyer organization in your area.

C. Means - After determining that a young lawyer organization would be beneficial for the community, you must analyze the resources available to the organization in order to determine whether it can be successful. The most important resource is potential members. Is there a sufficient number of young lawyers in the community willing to operate and build the organization? There is no magic number as to how many young lawyers should live or practice

in the community in order for a young lawyer organization to be successful. Rather, the more important factor is how many young lawyers are willing to serve the organization, to volunteer for its projects, and to recruit new members. It is also important to consider whether there is sufficient future leadership to continue the organization after you have aged out. The other resource to consider is money. Although money is extremely important, many young lawyer organizations succeed on very limited budgets. At the same time, you should consider what funds are available to you. Will the senior bar contribute? Will your potential members be willing to pay dues? Are sponsorships available? You should also remember that subgrants are available to ABA/YLD affiliates for both public service and member service programs and that newer affiliates are given special consideration.

D. Plan - You only have one opportunity to successfully start the organization. Therefore, you should plan the organization's initial course of action before jumping in with both feet. Create realistic and measurable goals for the organization, both for the short term and the long term. Develop a mission statement to give the organization some direction. Also, design a comprehensive plan for recruiting new members. In creating this plan, consider the best ways for obtaining buy in from all members of the young lawyer community. You should also determine the early focus of the organization. Will the organization focus on legal training, providing networking opportunities, social activities, public service or a combination of one or more of these goals? You should also attempt to reach out to the senior bar and gain their support before forging ahead so that you may lay the successful political groundwork for incorporating or re-incorporating your young lawyer organization into the bar.

By creating and following a plan, you will be better able to present a well-organized and effective organization to your members. At the same time, be willing to deviate from the plan when necessary. Remember, you do not have to accomplish everything in one year. The primary goal of the organization is for it to be in existence and successful ten, twenty and thirty years from now. Plan for your year and do not take on more than you or the organization can handle.

E. Leadership - Before introducing the organization to the community, you should recruit a well-balanced and respected group of individuals to serve as the organization's initial leadership. The organization will be more successful in its initial stages if you recruit six or seven individuals to help you in leading the organization. Try to find young lawyers who are respected and well known in the community. In the initial stages, the organization's principal goal will be recruiting new members. Socially outgoing individuals will be better able to introduce the organization to the legal community as a whole. If you have a judge or a chief governmental attorney in the community that is a young lawyer attempt to have him or her agree to serve as a leader in the organization. In addition to outgoing individuals, you need individuals who can ensure the organization's projects and programs are successfully completed. In other words, worker bees that you can count on to actually run the organization. You may also consider asking a leader of the senior bar to serve on the leadership council in order to cement the support of the senior bar. In choosing your leaders, remember that you are not attempting to create a crony system that will perpetuate its control for eternity. The new members you recruit will soon want to have a say in the organization as well. If you do not give new members an opportunity to quickly rise to a leadership position, they will abandon the organization.

F. Kickoff - Once you have your initial core leaders and have created detailed plans for the organization, you are ready to introduce the organization to the community. Think big. You want to grab the attention of your target audience. Combine your recruitment efforts with an initial project that will appeal to a large number of individuals in the community. For example, consider holding a judicial dinner or reception if you believe the judges and your potential members will be interested in such an event and the senior bar does not currently host such an event. You can also work with the senior bar to obtain a well-known or respected speaker for a function designed to recruit new members. Whatever you decide to do, time it with your initial large-scale marketing effort.

G. Follow through - Always keep in mind the purpose of your functions. Although you may be holding a judicial dinner to honor the judges, your primary goal is to obtain new members and volunteers for the organization. Plan your functions accordingly. Make sure that time is dedicated at the program to promote your organization and that the attendees are able to join the organization at the event. Also, make sure that you and your fellow leaders meet all of the young lawyers present at the function. After the function is over, follow up with the attendees through personal phone calls. The best way to promote a new organization is through personal contact and through building a personal relationship with the potential members. When promoting the organization or a program, do not rely solely upon email. Take the extra time to make phone calls or to walk the halls of the firms or government offices to solicit involvement or attendance. It is too simple for potential members to delete or ignore an email.

H. Opportunities - Once you recruit new members, you have to provide them with opportunities. You need to give willing and motivated individuals a way to become active in the organization. This may be through a committee that addresses an issue of importance to the new member, such as a judiciary committee, a social committee, planning a holiday party, or organizing a golf tournament. You may also want to consider holding officer or board elections three or six months after the initial membership recruitment effort to give the new members an opportunity to assume a leadership position. A potential way to accomplish this is to reserve a few of the initial board positions when you initially form the organization for future elections. This does not mean that you beg and plead for an individual to take on a major public service project. Some of your members will not want to devote themselves to the organization and any effort to guilt them into an undesirable project may simply chase them away. You must identify the individuals who want to be involved and give them meaningful opportunities while providing benefits to your other members so that they will still attend the organization's social functions and programs or pay their dues.

I. Continuity - The first years of an organization's existence are its most important. The direction and potential of the organization will, to a large extent, be determined during this time period. At the same time, this is also the time period that the organization is at its weakest. The organization will be less able to survive a bad president or a drastic turnover in its leadership. Just as you planned the organization's beginnings, you must also plan its future. Most importantly, you must plan its leadership. Despite an individual's desire to do well, sometimes he or she is simply unable to devote the time and effort required of the position. In the early stages of the organization, you may want to consider a screening process for future leaders. You will also want to make sure any candidate is fully aware of the responsibilities of the organization's president. Some new or smaller young lawyer organizations use a nominating

committee whereby candidates for the position of president are selected by the committee and then elected by the membership at large. This helps to ensure the election of qualified and motivated candidates while still allowing member input and involvement. The inclusion of a president-elect position can also help screen out potentially bad candidates by giving the organization a year to determine whether its future president will be capable of fulfilling the organization's expectations. Finally, you want to create a board of leaders that will allow continuity through returning members while also allowing new members to be added to the board. Some new organizations provide a position on the board (either voting or non-voting) to the recent past-presidents or founders of the organization. You may also want to consider staggered terms for the board of directors to help ensure that the organization does not experience 100 percent turnover in its leadership in any given year.

J. Review - Analysis of an organization does not end after it has been successfully started. Rather, you must continue to analyze the purpose, goals, successes, and failures of the organization. At the end of the first year of the organization's existence, form a committee to analyze the organization's year and to make recommendations for improvements and changes in the mission of the organization. This type of review and planning should continue the entire time that the organization exists.

K. Ask for Help - You have to do everything on your own. Resources are available to help you. The ABA/YLD has many resources available to young lawyer leaders to help them create and operate a young lawyer organization. For example, the Affiliate Assistance Team and the District Representatives for your area are available to help you. You might also find bar leadership instructional guides and bar leadership programs at the Division's conferences helpful to your task. Your state young lawyer association, your senior bar association, or other young lawyer organizations in your state may also be able to assist you. All you have to do is ask.

Starting a new organization can be a complicated task, but it is a task that can be successfully accomplished. Through planning, effective leadership, good friends and colleagues, and concrete goals, your organization's goals can be achieved. For assistance, please contact the ABA/YLD's Affiliate Assistance Team. Information about the Team is available at www.abanet.org/yld/affiliateleaders/home.html.