

Midwinter Keynote Address

Ev Nau – January 28, 2011

Our Society's future lies in your hands. What you think and do will shape us for years to come, just as an oyster shapes a pearl. That alone should be enough to convince anyone in his right mind to decline your job. But, you accepted, and I am grateful for the opportunity to share some thoughts with you this morning. As you listen, just remember that a pearl is never developed until a grain of sand irritates the oyster.

The grains of sand I share today are a result of my windshield time: time spent while driving throughout our Society since I can't fly anymore. Windshield Time provides an uncluttered view of what lies ahead. I am protected from any distractions by a transparent object. I can check the rearview mirror to see where I've been. However, I've learned that I make more progress by concentrating on what's ahead and not worrying about what has passed. I can't change that; I can only affect the direction I want to travel, and that is seen through the windshield, not the rearview mirror.

I have been a member of the Society for 35 years, serving on the Society staff for 16 and the Harmony Foundation staff for 5-1/2. I have led, written, spoken, judged, coached, taught, mentored and competed as a result. July will mark my 25th consecutive year on the Harmony University faculty. Proudly, I have earned 81 Man-of-Note awards (#8 was my son - #82 will be my nephew), and have actually visited 627 chapters in the Society.

I have learned one great lesson during the years: we are not a music organization; rather a membership organization that preserves a musical style. Gary Stamm suggested in 1994 that we run every bit of business for a solid year through a membership filter. If the task had nothing to do with membership development, it wouldn't be funded nor done by the staff. That didn't happen, and we have coped ever since with trying to run chapter meetings with few or no members. It hasn't worked very well.

Windshield time begins with asking "What if . . .?" and then the ideas flow, unimpeded by anything else. For example:

What if we approached membership issues with an eye to the outside world? Much of our current thinking is aimed at administering inwardly-focused programs to service our members rather than broader ones reaching out to new audiences for our Society. We have made strides in improving that, but have we truly explored in-depth ways to effectively meet new members on their terms, armed with current information to attract and keep them, and with the administrative capability to make the Society an attraction rather than an amusing footnote to history for others to read?

What if the chartering of new chapters was the beginning of a renewable relationship rather than the end of a process? Today, once a licensed group has fulfilled minimum requirements, a charter is issued and the chapter goes away virtually autonomous and often with little connection to the Society and what it wants or needs from the chapter. Just meet the minimum and you've got a charter . . . forever . . . and usually chapter growth pretty much grinds to a halt. What if the charter needed to be renewed

every five years? Do you have your driver's license given to you for life, or are there conditions you must meet to keep it? What if each chapter formed a covenant relationship with the Society that required it to show progress in membership growth, musical improvement, education of its members, and service to its community? There would always be the expectation that the chapter had major responsibilities to the Barbershop Harmony Society for its continued existence.

What if there were different levels of chartering? One level would be for our very excellent chapters and would grant them permission to compete, appear in public, make recordings, and produce shows . . . everything. Another level would be for the more laid-back chapters who like to do those things, but are not wishing to work as hard at them. A third level would be for the so-called hobbyist chapters, the ones who meet on Tuesday and sing through the old songs the way they have for 30 years. For each of these levels there would be a different set of parameters for their charter renewals and a different dues structure for their members based upon what it costs the Society to support these various levels of activity.

Imagine what it would be like to have a chapter come back every five years and be required to show a 3% growth in membership, a director moving toward certification, chapter show reviews that reported excellent results, registered quartets that are active and successful, and on it goes for the top level. The middle level may only need to show membership growth and a few other very attainable objectives. The hobbyist level would require not very much at all, and would help remove a huge problem: performance of poor barbershop in public places. Most of all, it could stop the bickering among the various chapters that exists today that only serves to retard Society growth. Remember, that which is measured gets results.

What if the Society hired a talent agent to be on staff? The job would be to ensure that the finest entertainers in our Society were put in front of audiences that want quality entertainment, but have never considered barbershopping. Top quartets and choruses will appear before the Mary Kay convention, or the American Legion national convention or the AMA convention or any of thousands of other meetings each year that are willing to pay handsomely for quality entertainment, yet have no idea who we are or what we're really capable of doing. If we want to change public perceptions, let's let our best singers and best entertainers do it for us while being rewarded for their skills. The agent would work on commission, and the entertainer would be well paid with only one condition: it would agree to do a struggling chapter's show for expenses-only in return for the big payday gathered from an outside source. The Society will develop a new income source. Rather than limiting when a chorus or quartet can compete, the Society can create a way to reward those who have skills honed in contests, and thus be a further source of encouragement to them.

And speaking of staff positions, what if the staff had a full membership department led by a full director? Currently, membership is not a department of its own, but is subjugated to another department. What does that say about the real importance of membership issues? Can anyone truly believe that membership is the number one problem when it is not being addressed with methods that clearly give credence to the claim?

What if the college quartet contest were aligned with the various collegiate conferences instead of Society districts? College men care more about their conferences than they do about districts that mean little, if anything, to them. Can you imagine what it would be like to talk to Ohio State about sponsoring a quartet, and . . . oh, by the way . . . Michigan already has two? Our art form would greatly increase in value if collegians were vying for an honor that already has some meaning to them and their colleagues in the SEC, ACC, Big 10 . . . the list is endless. We can find a way to include unaffiliated college quartets, too. When we do, we will be truly meeting the needs of future members at their levels, not ours.

What if our collegiate outreach efforts were geared toward college students who had singing opportunities in high school, but whose college programs cannot provide music to them as they seek an engineering or accounting degree? Could we be the organization for hundreds or thousands of young men who might join our ranks to fill their personal musical voids? Could we work toward membership in a barbershop chapter as college credit for these young men? What would the impact be on producing a more racially diverse Society over time?

What if there were no districts at all? Districts were founded to provide a link to chapters during a growing Society in a different era. With today's communications we can reach chapters from an international office and save a great deal of money that goes to largely repetitive services. Currently, those services cost our members \$735,162 a year in district dues alone. What if we concentrated on state and provincial championships instead of district championships? Have you ever driven into a town and seen a water tower that reads "Welcome to Smallville USA, Home of the Smallville Jets – State Champion Pop Warner Football Team?" I firmly believe that chapters like Nashville, current Dixie District Champions, are not fully recognized in their own home town because their district affiliation means nothing to the local press. But, what if they were the Tennessee State Champions? The number of PR and marketing opportunities expand rapidly when one considers how many states and provinces there are.

What if membership cards could be swiped and a permanent record of that member's or associate's participation could be developed? Every time a member went to a chapter meeting, an interchapter meeting, a convention, a school, a contest . . . whatever . . . his participation could be recorded accurately and we'd know what we needed to do to provide better service to our members. Every purchase could be recorded and trends could be established. Today, we only know the names of those who bought registrations to the convention; we do not know the names of those actually sitting in the seats. If we knew who was doing what and when and why, couldn't we plan better in the future? Wouldn't we really know what our members wanted rather than trying to guess at it from often slanted and potentially biased surveys?

What if a member and an associate paid dues that included a fee for an international convention registration? Whether he/she attended or not, the fee would be paid, and it would be significantly less than what a member pays now to attend International. Instead of worrying about meeting an attendance goal for each convention, we could concentrate on a known budgetary line item that would allow us to try some new and exciting things to make convention attendance far more attractive. The member would be more likely to attend if he had already paid for it.

What if we gave out Man of Note awards after the new member renewed his membership for the first time? Instead of saying, "Here's your pin for bringing him in," we could develop a recruiting and orientation program that developed mentorship and retention.

Despite what many honestly believe, we do not have and have never had a retention problem. During our years of greatest growth, our retention rate was about 80%, but our recruiting was nearly 23%. Today, we have attained retention of about 87+%, and it is constant. Yet our recruiting percentage has dipped below 10% and we are losing growth opportunities due to not recruiting enough, not because of any retention problem. Here's a fact for you: given an 87% retention rate of members, if each member were to recruit one new member once every six years, we would have a 1.5% constant growth rate. Do the math.

What if we spent some time developing membership classes and schools that dealt with effective orientation before the guest attends his first meeting? Do you remember your first night? A little scary? Did they speak a language that you didn't know and have habits with which you were totally unfamiliar? And did they call it fun? . . . Remember, the lions and Christians were fun, too . . . if you happened to be a lion.

What if Singing Valentines were used as a recruiting tool? Many chapters boast more than 100 Valentines and look only at the cash value. But, what if we looked at the customers as potential members? I believe that each person who purchases a Singing Valentine knows the power of music and wants to share it. What if we called all the recipients of the Singing Valentines and invited them and their loved ones to a chapter meeting designed to share our Society with them? What if we gave them a significant discount on a Valentine for the next year just for coming? We can influence those who have an idea of what music can do simply by making ourselves attractive and inviting.

What if we went to the Drum Corps International finals and looked for kids in their stocking feet as potential members? These are the 21-year olds who have just aged-out of their hobby and have left their shoes on the field as a memento that they were there. They know what it is to memorize music, engage in complicated choreography, build camaraderie and be competitive. Yet, our Society is a lot cheaper than what they're used to, believe me! Did you know that DCI now incorporates singing as part of their presentations? Why aren't we there to capitalize on this?

What if Harmony Foundation had more than 7% of the Society members as active annual contributors? What if all the leaders of the Society regardless of their level were involved in leading by example? If 7% of our members are capable of providing more than \$1.8 million each year, what could 15% or 25% of our committed members do? Many of our leaders look at their time and talent as their contribution, and while certainly worthwhile and appreciated, it cannot pay for the things we need to grow the Society. It simply can't. We need our leaders to be leaders at all levels of leadership, including within the Foundation. Are you aware that in some organizations being a leader requires a financial commitment to give to the organization's charitable arm?

What if the Society could incorporate the teaching of barbershop harmony to new armed forces recruits at the various induction centers in the USA and Canada? Using volunteers to reach 18-21-year old young

men and women, perhaps for the last time, we'll teach them to sing their service song, the national anthem and another patriotic selection all in barbershop harmony. Tim Hanrahan once shared his vision with me of watching an aircraft carrier tie up in Norfolk with 5,000 sailors in dress whites singing the national anthem on deck. Does it get you like it got me?

What if the leadership of the Society made room for the younger members to participate on the Board of Directors? We talk about passing the torch, but often don't know when to let go. If we truly want to know what young people want and how we can provide it to them, doesn't it make sense to have one as part of the decision process? Or, do we continue to enjoy our Thanksgiving meal while leaving the youth at the children's table?

I will have many hours of windshield time ahead to think and ask "What if?" again and again. I encourage each of you to utilize your windshield time to develop your own personal ideas. Each of you has gained your status as a leader here because you have learned how to work well with others and develop a team approach to solving our problems. I ask that you also use your time alone to be a little selfish, a little bold, and even a little rebellious. See our world as it can be and ask "What if?"

I once made an address to the Ontario COTS that focused on being successful, and it said in part, "I will succeed because I choose to succeed. The only failure that matters is the failure to try. The rest is merely consequence. Success in life is an attitude, and attitude is a result of choice. My choice is to succeed. I eat better when I do!"

My Dad taught me never to wish anyone good luck, for doing so might mean that I think he needs it. Instead, allow me to share a closer I have been using for years: Here's to your every success as you accept these grains of sand as they are intended: a challenge to be responsive to new ideas. View the Society through your own private windshield, unafraid to be a little selfish and bold enough to take dramatic, difficult new steps to create the pearls that will drive our Society's growth.