

Strategic Planning Responds to “Why Change” Survey

Over the next two weeks, the Strategic Planning Committee will be responding to opinions received from the “Why Change” questions posed via E-News and in the magazine in December and January. The committee will attempt to illuminate the efforts that are in process to address the issues, inform everyone about ideas raised by strategic planning efforts, and introduce new thinking stimulated by the membership’s responses to the “Why Change” initiative.

Members’ Experience with Pony Club and Horses

We received many responses from members around the country about the amount of contact and experience with horses each had, and we found that it varied greatly throughout the country. However, it is evident that more horses are boarded and leased now than previously happened in Pony Club. Members with horses at home seem to ride more and spend more time with their horses than their counterparts with boarded and leased horses. However, it is evident that there is much less time spent riding and caring for horses than was the norm 10 to 20 years ago. Our educational goals (ratings) may need to be adjusted to address this profile change. Without adequate time and experience, members may not be able to learn at the same rate as they had in the past in order to move up through the ratings the same way. This is not wrong; it is just different, so it is something to look at and review.

As we live farther away from our animals, the levels of knowledge about horses, how they function, their behavior and social interactions will naturally decrease. More of our Pony Club members and families do not have a routine experience with grazing animals, or time to watch them in a group in a field, or in the stall. As their general knowledge base decreases, we will require different educational programs for members, parents & volunteers to meet their needs.

Members DESIRE the Pony Club Program: education, evaluation, competition, interaction with friends, and an opportunity to share their passion for horse with other like-minded members. This program doesn’t need to be exactly the same for all members. It is evident that members need and want opportunities for peer interaction and team-building experiences. We need to be sure that these opportunities are available to ALL members regardless of their specific situation. We need to creatively find ways to help the member who may be away at college, or who lives in a remote area, or is in a small group that cannot provide these opportunities. We must provide a way for each of these members to hook up with other members to have the experiences that they desire.

One of the greatest strengths of Pony Club is the reliance on performance standards. We are one of the few organizations for youth that maintains standards of performance, not just the on-upmanship of competition. Through their interaction with the horse, as they develop their horsemanship skills, knowledge and responsibility for horse care, our members mature as individuals with a sense of responsibility and integrity. We value this and want to see that this aspect of Pony Club endures.

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What is PC doing about it?

SHORT TERM

Leaders have recognized that most of our members do not progress past the D level, and as a result a concerted effort is being made to improve the program available to members at the club and regional level for Ds. The Back to the Barn (BTTB) initiative has been established to help members learn what they need to know to allow them to safely take a horse away from home overnight or for a few days.

Efforts are being made to return Horse Management education as a program that has a central focus for the club level. This includes a new curriculum for clubs and leaders and an education program for HM judging.

PC Leaders understand and recognize the unique leverage the horse gives as a means for developing responsibility, character and integrity in youth. The bond that is established when young people care for a horse carries over to every part of their lives. It becomes one of the strongest pieces of pride horse people share. Moreover, within Pony Club, the rating level a member has obtained is a signal for how skilled they are around a horse. Those who have attained higher ratings get instant status and respect from those who are working up the ladder from below. That respect is given because both sides expect a specific standard of behavior to be connected to the rating. More often than not, higher level PCers carry that mantle well. The recognition of this link between ratings and a code of behavior is something that all agree is valued and needs to be maintained.

LONG TERM

Leaders recognize that one size does not fit all clubs or members. We need to find ways to meet the changing demographics and availability of horses. Members will need more flexibility in crossing club or regional boundaries for services, community, peer to peer experiences and teambuilding. If the requisite program is not available within the local area, leaders need to be looking at ways members can find programs that meet their needs. Online program offerings, and flexibility to move across club boundaries if needed, or other creative solutions will help individuals meet their curricular and social needs.

We recognize that events need to be affordable, yet they may require different solutions of grouping members in order to have sufficient membership participation to host an event. Perhaps the combination of geographically close clubs to sponsor camps, clinics, rating preps, etc., might be a solution. Regions may want to work together in a similar fashion to sponsor certain activities.

As we find that our Pony Club members and families have less experience with and accessibility to horses, we find that members do not progress through the standards of proficiency at the same speed as when they were conceptualized in the late 1970s. We need to find ways to expand or modify our educational programs so as to meet the needs of members, parents & volunteers. Leadership is responding to this with discussions of alternative educational programs, fitness basics and horse husbandry basics that can be extended to volunteers and parents, as well.

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Leaders have recognized that members need assistance getting recognition for their accomplishments when they dedicate themselves to riding. Many school systems and the public at large do not recognize the physical fitness aspects of riding a horse and the responsibility that is developed in caring for a horse and in training and conditioning. We need to get the message out to parents, peers, the non-horse community and schools so that they can recognize the effort, responsibility, training time and physical accomplishment of successfully completing a rating, or competing at a rally. Members need a model or support to help with this process.

Leadership is aware that unless upper level and older PCers have a peer group that they regularly enjoy within PC they will go to the larger horse world to find it. Once they have branched out to the larger horse world, much of the rigidity of rules and horse management currently governing PC seem unreasonable and parochial. They are unwilling to submit to these confines and cease to participate. Efforts to address this reality are being explored.

When C level members are the major instructors for a club, they don't get adequate peer to peer interaction or instruction for their own development. There is the consistent observation that the quality of Pony Club experience is dependent on members having a large and diverse (knowledge and experience-wise) group of Pony Club members to interact with. Unless instruction is available within the club that provides opportunity for them to improve and socialize with peers, C level members go outside the club. Leadership is aware that if inter club and regional experiences can fill this need, Pony Club has a good chance of retaining that member. If the program access is not provided within the organization, members will leave. Leadership needs to help provide ways for flexibility in crossing club or regional boundaries for interaction or find other ways for them to obtain these experiences if needed.