

Strategic Planning Responds to “Why Change” Survey

This is the third installment from the Strategic Planning Committee in response to opinions received from the “Why Change” questions posed via E-News and in the magazine in December and January. In this installment, which highlights the “Member Experience,” the committee is again trying 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.

Member Experience

Members have responded with great passion and pride for the organization. They want most of the positive aspects that they LIKE to stay the same, while at the same time they want to have all of the negative problems FIXED. On the club level, the most frequently mentioned concerns that members said need fixing are issues with parents and politics, insufficient program for Cs, fairness issues, how to share the essence of Pony Club with friends and family, and the lack of opportunities to prepare for and rate up the levels. At the regional level, the most frequently mentioned concerns were Horse Management fairness or pickiness at rallies, gate keeping and restrictions to participation, web and other communication issues. At the national level, members would like to see a better web site, more access to ratings, testing fairness, an opportunity to develop a community of upper level members, and elimination of rules that seem arbitrary, silly or capricious to the members.

The traditional rally experience isn’t working for many clubs and regions due to geography, demographics, and/or economics. Attendance is especially low among the upper level members. Members want Pony Club to provide a strong program that allows them to demonstrate responsibility, engage in team-play, and participate in Peer-to-Peer learning. Rallies and camps provide this sort of opportunity by their very nature. Respondents were seeking more lower-level, local (hence less expensive) opportunities to rally. The perception is that there has to be an intermediate step for those who may never get to a regional rally to have these experiences.

Leadership is a valued part of the Pony Club experience. Proactive planning must take place to provide leadership opportunities to members as well as to DCs and parents. Peer-to-Peer learning is one of our most valued—yet misunderstood—components of the Pony Club program. Peer-to-Peer can mean both formal instruction (teaching a lesson) and an informal exchange of knowledge (the important sharing of information that happens around the horse without an actual lesson). In some cases, parents need to be educated about the value of Peer-to-Peer instruction and not view peers as “deficient communicators of knowledge.” This is especially true when we know Peer-to-Peer learning is most prized by members and is often the one of the most effective approaches in Pony Club. Our program for “teaching teachers” needs to be reviewed and strengthened in order to better hone the teaching skills of our members and the consistency of instructional delivery. While some clubs have a range of member levels that allow them to provide appropriate Peer-to-Peer instruction, overall we need more balance in teaching opportunities and expectations. For example, a C-1 can’t be expected to be the only instructional source for a whole club. All members need a peer learning program to instruct them as well. To become the best they can be, members need to be exposed to the range of levels. We also need a system in place to involve our graduates. We often have willing graduates who have moved away from their home area who want to help; but we have no consistent way for either the club or the graduate to connect.

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What is PC doing about it?

Short term

Pony Club is committed to continuing the traditional program, encouraging and honoring the achievements of those who have progressed through the ratings to the highest level of achievement. In order to maintain program growth along with the traditional approach, new strategies are needed for members who do not have as much access to a horse to move up through the rating levels in the typical time period of membership. The organization is committed to offering program to a broader audience as there are fewer members who fit the “traditional backyard pony” description that the ratings were originally designed to teach. With urbanization and current school commitments, many more members only have the opportunity to work with horses one to two days a week in a barn setting. We need to develop programs that will meet the needs of these members, as well. In his March letter President Tom Adams said “When I say ‘member’ I mean all children and adults who want to learn more about horses.” Both the Instruction and Activities Councils have been examining their programs and delivery methods. Several regions are working to strengthen the program to small clubs such as the D program and Horse Management education components.

The Instruction Council is working on a formal Peer-to-near-Peer program. It recognizes that the instructor in the Peer-to-Peer setting has to have more knowledge/experience/skill than the peer who is being taught, and that the peer instructor needs coaching and mentoring to maximize his/her education. Pony Club has assumed responsibility for creating this model for members. Once understood and implemented, it stands to be one of the organization’s best educational systems. Although Pony Club has often accomplished Peer-to-Peer informally and has done it well, there are plans in place to make it one of our formalized teaching methodologies.

Some regions are working to extend the opportunities for Ds and members of small clubs through expansion of their member program by planning region-wide opportunities, or by taking clinics “on the road.”

Leadership recognizes that our members’ hard work, growth, and skill development results from their association with the horse and Pony Club. They share the pride in members’ achievement as they progress through the ratings and honor the accomplishment of those who attain the upper levels. There is no intent to tamper with that core value of the organization.

Long term

The organization is committed to developing its electronic communications into a modern and user-friendly tool. The goal is to allow online membership registration, to have access to local, regional, and national calendars of events and to be able to enter rallies, clinics, competitions, testings, etc., online. In addition, interactive educational opportunities, online communities and networks and video trainings are being planned.

Team play is a hallmark of the organization, and remains one of the most important skills learned in Pony Club. Historically, members have learned team play as an ancillary part of being a member of a large, diverse club. As the number of small clubs has increased, the opportunity for

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Peer-to-Peer and team play within the club has decreased. To counter this trend, and to foster the leadership development that occurred in the large club, Pony Club is working on developing a formal leadership training model for our youth and leadership. Some regions are also working on creating intra-club opportunities for members whose clubs lack the critical mass necessary to foster these skills.

Peer-to-Peer learning remains one of the essential assets of Pony Club. Today’s youth have less access to enjoy unsupervised play, but are now typically “coached” by adults during what used to be the “free time” during developmental years. Because of this, the physical and social skills learned during unsupervised play is missing for many youth, even though this sort of play is important to healthy social skill development. Pony Club, and the education that occurs through interaction with the horse, are among the few places in our society where these experiences are still enabled. This happens to a large degree because of the time spent in Peer-to-Peer learning. Older, higher-rated or more experienced members mentor, lead and encourage others. For the process to work there has to be access to peer groups at all levels. That is, the older, or higher-rated or more experienced members all need sufficient numbers of peers to maintain their interest and social engagement. The same is true for members at all levels and age groups. Small clubs typically do not have sufficient numbers to provide these essential opportunities. Because of this, the organization is working hard to create opportunities for members of small clubs and their parents. These opportunities include educating our leaders, members, and parents about the value of Peer-to-Peer instruction, team play and leadership development that has been part of the historical Pony Club program. Pony Club leaders are also exploring other methods which would allow members to go outside their club or regions for access to program, social groups, and specialty education that may not be available in their particular setting.