Case Notes

# Chapter 10: Listening to Out-Group Members

# Case 10.1: Next Step

## Case Summary

This case study outlines the work of a student organization called *Next Step*, a graduate student organization at a large West Coast University. James, the president of the organization, decided, based on performance, that the previous fundraiser method, a bake sale, was costing money and not acquiring enough revenue to support the organization’s programs. A meeting was held to determine a new fundraiser, and vocal members of *Next Step* began planning for a t-shirt sale, without going through a voting procedure or ensuring that all organization members had their say. The vocal members were extremely enthusiastic and supportive, and began planning the fundraiser almost instantly.

After the meeting, James overheard the organization’s treasurer, Nichole, call the t-shirt sale “stupid.” He also heard the organization’s secretary, Ursula, agree with her. James did not remember them speaking to their disapproval at all during the meeting. At the time, James decided he had wanted to hold an anonymous vote to ensure that all considerations were heard from all members.

The next day, the t-shirt committee members had continued to move forward with preparing for the t-shirt sale, when James overheard another student, Todd, speaking with Nichole regarding the potential fundraiser, saying that he also didn’t support the t-shirt sale. At this point, James decided to confront both Todd and Nichole and ask for their opinions on the change in fundraiser. James was surprised to find out that they were not in support of selling t-shirts and were looking at *Next Step* as nothing more than a resume builder. It was at this point that James decided that he needed to prepare for the meeting and determine whether or not the fundraiser change was the right decision.

Case Analysis

This case study presents the opinions of **out-group members**, who although are not as vocal as the other members of the organization, are still an integral part of the organization and its leadership team. The characters in this case study, Ursula, Nichole, and Todd, did not support the proposed change in fundraiser type, however, did not express their disagreement with the change in an open-forum. Because of their lack of voice, the fundraiser began, despite their disagreement.

This case study serves as an example of why organizational leaders should seek to hear the voice of all organizational members, and how organizational leaders must be the “voice of the voiceless” whenever possible. Strong leaders have good **listening** skills, and create forums in which all can either speak their minds freely or express their opinions in a way in which their voices can be heard. James did not follow the main premise of **leader-member exchange theory**, and did not ensure that a relationship with each group member was formed so that their voices could be heard.

## Sample Answers to Case Questions

*1. This chapter discusses several reasons that out-groups form. What is the best explanation for why Ursula, Nichole, and Todd appear to be out-group members? What impact are they having on Next Step? Do they have legitimate concerns? Discuss.*

Ursula, Nichole, and Todd appear to be out-group members because they did not express their opposition to the t-shirt fundraiser in front of James or in front of the rest of the organization. Each one either was overheard saying something negative concerning the fundraiser or approached James individually to express their opinions.

Even though Ursula, Nichole, and Todd are out-group members, they are still having an impact on the organization by making James think and consider whether or not they are the minority or if others think the same way they do. As board members, they are leaders of the organization, and whether or not they are simply using the organization as a resume builder, their opinions do matter for the good of the organization.

Ursula, Todd, and Nichole do have a legitimate concern. Based on the conversation in the case study, it appears they didn’t have the opportunity to express their opinions on the potential fundraiser, and other, more vocal members began acting before a formal decision had taken place.

*2. How could the initial meeting about fund-raising strategies have been conducted so that all members were included in the decision?*

It appears that the meeting led to vocal organizational members acting before a formal decision was made about changing the fundraiser. There was no evidence that James conducted either an open or closed forum where all members could express their opinions, either in front of the entire group or privately. Soliciting feedback from members that do not feel comfortable expressing themselves in front of others (through a survey or private vote) may have been a better approach to obtain baseline data and determine whether or not the t-shirt idea would be accepted by the group.

*3. Of the six strategies for how leaders should respond to out-group members, do you think that certain strategies might be more appropriate or effective in this situation given the verbalized feelings about Next Step from the out-group members?*

Strategies, 1, 2, 4, and 6 are the strategies that would have helped James with the out-group members.

Strategy 1: Listen to Out-Group Members – James could have approached Nichole and Ursula the first time he heard discussion. Instead, he waited until he heard Nichole and Todd speaking to approach them about their concerns.

Strategy 2: Show Empathy to Out-Group Members – James’s conversation with Nichole and Todd did not demonstrate any empathy. He appeared to listen to their concerns, but did not restate or reframe them in a way that would make them see that he was listening.

Strategy 4: Help-Out Group Members Feel Included – James has the responsibility to do this for his next meeting. He has three members that he knows of that need to feel included and connected to others. He cannot force them to do so, but he can at least know that he gave them the option, as leadership to be a part of the team and the decision-making process.

Strategy 6: Give Out-Group Members a Voice and Empower Them to Act – This is James’s last option that he can do to make sure the other leadership team members are included. He easily could yield some of his leadership to enable them to either contribute to t-shirt planning committee or to the next major decision made by the organization.

*4. How could other members of the group besides James help to build the group identity and sense of cohesion in Next Step?*

Although it is more implicitly implied than explicitly implied in this case, the out-group members probably did not feel included in the decision-making process. James has a responsibility to ensure that these group members are included in important decisions, especially because they are conduits to outside people in the group and organizational board members. James has a responsibility to let Nichole, Ursula, and Todd know they are part of the larger group and help them feel included, if they want to be included.

*5. In this situation, do you think it is worth the time and effort to try and include Ursula, Nichole, and Todd? Defend your answer?*

It is always worth the time and effort to include voices in an organization, especially those in leadership positions. However, it appears that the t-shirt committee has already moved forward, and James might not be able to reverse their initial actions. What James could do would be to work with Ursula, Nichole, and Todd to ensure this type of miscommunication does not occur again. By soliciting their feedback and asking them for future ideas, James could pull them back into the group and alter the decision-making process prior to the next decision that *Next Step* makes.