

## **Parent Club Best Practices**

Reflections on the State of Affairs – The Samoyed Club of America

Recently a club officer from a local Samoyed club passed along to me a response from the AKC Club Development Facebook page that contained much wisdom and relevance for most of us in non-profit organizations.

Looking back at my own experiences, club problems seem generally the same whether in Little League, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, or local, All-Breed or Parent clubs. I thought I would share the Facebook page observations with my experience and perspective as the current president for the fifth and hopefully last time with the Samoyed Club of America and also as a current member of the AKC Parent Club Best Practices Committee tasked with developing a model “playbook” for newly formed dog clubs which also includes ideas and fundamentals that are of great value to existing parent clubs.

### **AT THE TOP OF THE LADDER**

Those on the board of directors or heading up committees in non-profits arrived in those positions usually after “paying their dues” but not until figuring out the gameboard, benefiting from lucky timing, having mentors or circles of supportive friends, and hopefully because the members felt through club elections that these were the best to put in office. What happens to those who don’t make it quickly enough to the board or prestigious assignment level and how can this affect the hobby in the long run?

Most of us have chosen our hobby. We want our commitment of time to be worthwhile and pleasurable as we have other endeavors where we can spend our time or money. Sometimes those in a club want to be in positions of importance or power but find themselves blocked. Clubs can ask for volunteers throughout a club year but not everyone is “found” a plum assignment.

For some of us, the club or dogs are our entire life and we pass the time daily on Facebook, on the phone with dog people, or going to shows or dog events. We live and breathe for our hobby and maybe we feel only we know how a club should be run if we were just on that board.

We all have skills. We just have to find the right fit which can mean even a different club or hobby. Otherwise, those who want to volunteer and contribute

become disgruntled and often just quit a club or hobby. Why go to meetings if you aren't recognized or "rewarded" and asked to be a volunteer?

## ELECTIONS

Annual club elections allow for turnover and an influx of new ideas but often those in power can stay in power despite formidable opposition. And if someone is performing their job well, why should they leave? Who has the right to decide that? Interestingly, not all the power in a club rests with those on a board at any one time as power is constantly shifting.

To get elected one sometimes simply needs name recognition. Unless there is a dearth of candidates and then no one wants to be on that board. With only a bare majority of the membership usually voting in most elections, those with their last name at the beginning of the alphabet and those who have media exposure have an advantage. Volunteers for projects and committees show they can be depended upon early in a club affiliation and hopefully move up to board or officer positions. In a very large club, there are sometimes more volunteers than positions available.

With social media, one has a built-in audience ready to offer support for whatever viewpoint one wishes to take if someone is upset with a club. Of course, one mistake at a dog club meeting or at a dog show can take on epic end-of-the-world proportions if it goes viral on Facebook. But a healthy club or organization is one that allows for dissent and can use it as a sounding board on how well an organization is performing and make systemic adjustments if needed.

## ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

How do we evaluate how well a non-profit is doing? We don't have annual appraisals, performance standards, and job descriptions for everyone that are up to date. If a club is growing, by the time a job description has been in place for a year, it is probably already out of date. Some members can easily work outside their job description and are skilled with minimal friction in working across committees to get a project or assignment accomplished. These are the ones you want in key positions! When you can work as a team and have ready volunteers to fill in the gaps then you have arrived at a good point.

We can't fire people in the traditional sense for not fitting in and about the best one can do is preferring charges which is a long process and usually tears up a club.

We also can't measure profits, earnings per share, or stock prices. But we can look at turnover and membership satisfaction as indicators of an organization's effectiveness. When you can't get volunteers and the events are poorly attended, then you have a performance indicator.

## EXPECTATIONS

Some members believe they can become a board member and solve all the problems immediately. I certainly looked at the club that way when I first joined. How hard can it be to jump in and fix everything? There is a very steep learning curve and it will often take quite a few years to figure out how a dog club runs, understand past practices and the Bylaws and finally obtain a feel for whether the members and Board are ready to approve anything radically new. Every club or organization has a distinct personality as if it were a living and breathing entity.

Not all "rules" are written down but clubs should do their best to have a rule for something that occurs regularly. One should hope for strong mentors and guides and that the timing and issue are right to effectively work with the various cliques, factions and clans which exist in any club or organization.

Timing is still critical and if you are on the board making, amending, or splitting motions, always count your votes. Where is your support and who is on the fence? Playing cards early taught me to count tricks, trump suits, or both. There is no magic to it.

So, you have been in the club for 5-20 years and you want to be on the board or in charge? Paths can be unusually quick. That requires key mentors, as well as important experiences on other club committees,

## REALITY

Now, for the future of this club or almost any club, you are faced with declining memberships, infighting, constant drama, social media blasting, and the inability of a newcomer to rise to the top-even if they have the skills to become an important member of your board. The commentor on the AKC Club Development Facebook page identified three key points that a club would do well to remember: Respect people, include people, and empower people. Let's look at these.

## RESPECT PEOPLE

If one assumes rightly that while there is definitely interest in purebred dogs within the younger generation, there can be built in walls and obstacles that prevent one

from being involved with a lot of the traditional club activities. Some play sports in school, are active in scouts, ride horses, participate in band or 4H, or work on the farm or in the family business. One turn off for some are all the meetings one has to attend to be an officer or club member at local all-breed club meetings. Driving in the evening for club meetings and then back home is difficult.

Attendance is required at most of these meetings which are generally on a weekday and at a time that is not only inconvenient but impossible for families to make together. Now that most of us have embraced Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Skype meetings, we can have more of our meetings on-line and at more convenient times. Pre-pandemic, often the “club meetings” were more social hour get togethers that left new people feeling unwanted or left out. It was difficult for me with a busy schedule to sit through social chit-chat before the business part of the meeting came up.

If you are running a meeting, keep it on task and short. Give everyone at least one chance to ask a question or comment but stick to a time limit. It would be smart to hold more social hours/educational events (when it is safe to do so) to encourage new people to join and get to know each other in a more appropriate manner. You can't expect people to come along and just go to meetings and volunteer at your show. What's the value of their membership in that situation?

Especially when these clubs with members who have been there for twenty plus years are incredibly clique heavy. It has been commented that some long-standing members spend their time critiquing and talking down to younger members. It is important that any new member, regardless of age, feel respected from the beginning.

Please return your phone calls and messages, regardless of who calls. Even as national president, people won't pick up the phone, text me or call me back. I had one board member comment that if the president called four times, it must be important. If we can't call back, then we have lost a basic element of respect.

Learn to live with the majority vote and move on together with the decision. Newcomers don't want to be a part of the bickering, screaming, and war time at an annual meeting or “gathering of the clans.” Listen more and don't be so quick to interrupt. You will learn more if you become a better listener than talker. Students are taught this early in the schools. Be respectful or you will be asked to leave a classroom or meeting.

## INCLUDE PEOPLE

Diversity brings in different ideas, experiences and more options to solve problems. Most of us joined a club for the social component and to have an opportunity to meet and work with others for a common goal. What is best for the common good, in what direction should we be going, and how best can we meet the purpose of this club's existence? Find a way to bring in people with various backgrounds for the betterment of the club, project, or work assignment. You will still have the cliques and clans. They change, objectives change, and sometimes there are members in several cliques. Part of the challenge of running a club is to look for commonality of objectives and interests. We called it "Win-Win Bargaining" or "Interest Based Bargaining" in the old days. You can find it; it takes work but everyone gains.

We all benefit the more a group is proficient in Robert's Rules. A National Specialty should have a special class on Robert's Rules and not just for the board or president. Knowledge does give you power. Luck is important but you can create your own luck with knowledge of your club's politics, history, and where the power centers lie. You won't learn this in 48 months. Get everyone to work together and people will enjoy seeing each other for meetings or events. Meetings can be fun and full participation is a necessary component.

## EMPOWER PEOPLE

My first time as president I thought I would just do the committees' work for them and that is what happened in a few cases. This is a club and not just the president's show. We are here for a common goal-to protect and advance our bred. Most innovation comes from those in the trenches and not from those at the top. I learned to be a better listener than talker as I wanted new ideas and ways of looking at a problem.

The job of president is to provide an atmosphere to allow for growth, mistakes, your ownership of a problem or assignment and a fair chance for all of us to be heard from. We will help you if you get overwhelmed. We are all in this together with each piece of the dog game equally important: AKC, parent, all-breed and local clubs as well as judges, suppliers, handlers, members, exhibitors, superintendents, stewards, etc.

We have to be willing to empower our younger members but not overwhelm them. Some of us took on many assignments from the beginning with a new club. If you

have people who are good at working with a wide variety of people and not afraid to work outside of a job description, use them in the facets in which they excel. The key will become obvious over time: work closely with others and in a respectful manner.

You can learn from some really great mentors; and you can learn how not to do things. I can assure you there is no quicker teacher than learning from your own mistakes. What is best for the common good of the club and breed?

Some folks are lucky to be brought into the fold quickly but be careful you don't burn them out with too much responsibility that is given too soon. In most of the trades, there is an apprenticeship program for good reason. In the military, you learn not to send a soldier into a war unless he was first effectively trained to protect himself and others.

Degrees are fine but not necessary to do most of what we ask of our volunteers.

There always be numerous other young members still out there wondering how they can be "found" but very eager to help out. It is a careful balance and one that is important to hit just right to retain young members. It is important to not simply view new members as "workers" but rather understand that people invest more when they feel themselves invested in. Our greatest assets are our members.

In conclusion, we should examine our club structure and internal workings and figure out what we have to change to encourage more younger members from our communities. We need to attract new people to the club and give them a reason to stay. The future of a club is not in keeping in line the few "heretics" who cause problems but more about getting new "converts." Why should people want to join and stay with our national club or any club for that matter? Certainly not to watch the infighting.