



# **Making Clubs Work**

A practical guide to creating  
successful clubs, societies and other  
membership organisations

BRAD PARKES

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societies and other membership organisations  
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# Testimonials

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**John Smith**

Director of Academy of High Achievers

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**Julia Dankworth**

Director of World Wide Ltd

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**Paul Brown**

Director of Academy of Forum Professional

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**Susan Green**

Director of Instant Connections

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## Foreword

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## Introduction

Over a number of years, I have developed a passion for membership and membership organisations, and I believe our society and communities would be stronger and more pleasant places to live and work in if more people were members of more organisations.

As part of my work at Round Table on the Board and in Membership Teams, I have developed a structure around which a club can recruit and retain members. Recent years have seen me take that work, research and development and compile into a book – this book.

The book is a collection of my own personal stories from my growing up years, and my observations and experiences in clubs and associations, with some helpful hints and tips of how to operate a successful club.

It is not my concern if an individual wishes to join one club or organisation or another, it does not matter if someone is a member of Round Table, Rotary, W.I., Lions, Scouts, English Heritage, National Trust or a local reading club, what matters is that people belong. What matters to me is that they get a sense of belonging, a pride in belonging, and a feeling of security by belonging.

**Brad Parkes**

Spring 2014

## How this book can work for you

My aim in writing this book has been to make a difference - a difference to you as a member of a club or organisation, a difference to the club or organisation to which you belong, and a difference to the community at large.

What your needs are, and how you feel you can best support your club or organisation, will, of course, be distinctive and unique, and so I have tried to make this book as flexible as possible, in order for you to be able to read it in the way that works best for you, and take from it the information and advice which is most relevant to where you and your organisation are today.

The research that forms the basis of this book was originally carried out to provide the content and structure for a 36-hour training workshop, which I ran for guys in the club I was a member of at the time. This workshop provided a plan, a campaign, the inspiration and the motivation to save that club.

Later, I was asked to replicate this for the clubs in my area (there were about 12). It was felt that 36 hours was too much time, so I distilled it down to an 8-hour/one day workshop. This worked well and received awards, the greatest of which was the success of increasing the number of members across those clubs collectively by over 20% inside two years.

This success was later further recognised and I have since been asked to run workshops sharing these stories and the ideas across the UK, and internationally, at various meetings and conferences. The ideas and stories have been enhanced, added to, changed over time, and now have been distilled into a book that I hope everyone involved in the world of clubs and membership organisations will find useful.

The book is divided into three parts - a story, real life examples and observations drawn from actual organisations, and a summary of key learning points. The story involves a young man called Billy, and his development into a thoughtful and helpful member of his community, through the guidance of a mentor called Alex. Billy's experiences are based on my own - either on things I went through myself, or else things I saw others go through.



I have woven each one into an episode in Billy's development, and each episode in Billy's development also corresponds to a key area in terms of the successful development and growth of a membership organisation.

In this way, each crucial area of growth and development in a membership organisation is looked at from three different perspectives:

- through the story of Billy, Alex and a café called Archie's Place
- through examples and observations drawn from actual organisations
- through a series of key learning points

Whether you wish to read the book as a whole, moving through each chapter from story to examples to key learning points, or whether you simply would like to concentrate on the examples, or the key learning points, or just the stories, is entirely up to you and what suits you best. However you approach this book, I firmly believe there will be something here for you to learn and apply, to make your own club or organisation more focused, more popular, more successful.

There are also some pages at the back of the book left blank specifically to allow you to make notes on actions as they crop up in your mind, so that they are captured in the same place and contained between the same covers for future reference as you start putting your ideas into action.

Once you have read this book, I encourage you to log on to the website and register on the forum pages to share the ideas and thoughts that work for you. [insert weblink] Here, you can also learn from those who are sharing their ideas and connect with others who are in the same boat or have been and have found a solution.

Enjoy the read!



## **Chapter One**

### Hidden Gems and Unlocked Doors



## Chapter One Hidden Gems and Unlocked Doors

Billy started at the smell of not-quite burning but soon-to-be cinders toast. His mind had definitely been elsewhere. Lunging for the cooker, he whipped the toast out from under the grill and set it on a plate. Grabbing his coffee, he sat down at the table and tried to focus on simply eating his breakfast without starting a house fire. It was the morning of his very first appraisal.

He'd been working for BCH for just over a year now and he was excited and nervous in just about equal parts. Alex, his manager, was a great guy and Billy had already learned a lot from him. He really hoped he'd pleased Alex with the way he'd been working, but he knew he still had a long way to go. Strangely enough, he found himself really looking forward to the appraisal – it would be good to know how he was doing and what he could do better. More than anything, though, he was looking forward to spending the day with Alex – he just knew and understood so much, and Billy loved spending time with him.

Billy had first met Alex when the older man had done some part-time teaching at the college from which Billy graduated. Over his breakfast, Billy's mind wandered to the day he sat in a workshop conducted by Alex, remembering how he thought to himself, "One day I'm going to work with him."

Billy had been brought up in a family-run hotel in a seaside resort. The business had given him a fantastic foundation to working with teams and the public, as he had shared his house every week of the summer season with a new bunch of friends. He had learned from an early age that he had as big a part to play in the success of the business as anyone else in the team. His father would impress on him the importance of making friends and of making sure that those other kids had a great holiday: "If the kids have a great holiday, they will be happy. Happy kids mean happy mums and dads. Happy mums and dads mean repeat business and recommendations."

Billy had moved away from the seaside to the big city at the end of his schooling in order to go to college. He'd spent three years studying, had graduated and had then joined BCH at the beginning of the previous summer on their graduate scheme. Billy felt at ease at BCH – being part of a family-run business literally felt like a home from home to him.

Okay, it wasn't a hotel, but, Billy mused, the two businesses had a surprising amount in common. BCH was a family-run retail and manufacturing business.

They designed, built and fitted kitchens and bathrooms and had been doing so for three generations, having gained a reputation for service and reliability together with consistently fair pricing and high-quality workmanship. The company had expanded over the years, growing from three small, local showrooms to now operating out of 100 showrooms across the country, together with a large manufacturing plant, warehouse and distribution under the 'group' umbrella. They had even recently acquired sites that extracted and supplied all the raw materials they used.

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Alex, Billy's manager, had been with the firm about 15 years. Like Billy, he'd joined BCH on their graduate scheme and he'd stayed with the company ever since. He thought it likely that he'd stay with the company until he retired. Not through a lack of ambition, and certainly not because they paid exceptionally well, but more because, now that he had joined the Board, he clearly saw just how well the company's values and his were aligned.

During his years at BCH, Alex had discovered he was a great salesman – not because he bullied prospects or had a 'system' for 'closing the sale', but simply because he really enjoyed discovering the customer's vision and understanding what the finished job would be like for them. He always put the customer's needs ahead of his own, and supplied what was right for them and not what was right for him or the business. Other graduates had come and gone over the years, most making a name for themselves with increased one-off sales, but Alex had outperformed them all with repeat business and the trust of his clients. If he'd wanted, he could have had the shortest buying cycle of all sales team members.

Alex had been the fastest graduate to be promoted to manager and had been given the responsibility to train up all new graduates joining the organisation. The company recognised that Alex was skilled at guiding new recruits through their early months, demonstrating to them how to uphold the company's values and how to engage with the business while putting the customer at the centre of all that they do. Despite these added responsibilities, Alex maintained a regular sales role and the responsibility for overseeing 12 units in a region – the largest region in the Group. Alex instilled in all the unit employees under his guidance a happy, friendly demeanour and, as a result, they consistently outperformed other stores and regions.

Whereas other managers held on to their knowledge or contained individuals' potential in fear that they might threaten them in their role, Alex identified that if he encouraged progression and continued to support and develop his team, they would all grow, all get better and all achieve more. As subordinates grew into their next job, they did not depose Alex, but they allowed him to grow and develop into his next job too. Alex also held the best staff retention figures in the whole of the business.

Alex made a commitment to all his graduate trainees to share all his knowledge and expertise with them so that they too might use that knowledge to be the best leaders they could be. He shared his unique proven steps to success with them all, and encouraged them to put this shared knowledge and learning into practice so that they could be the best they could be. He knew that his reputation was reflected in what they did, not in what he did alone.

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Billy was sitting at his breakfast table, considering what the day ahead and his appraisal held in store for him. He felt he had worked hard during the year. He had achieved some great results and he had always wanted to do his best for himself and for Alex.

In his mind, Billy was taken back to the moment when he realised that all the students on his course were applying for their first jobs. Billy had already secured his. He still had his father's words ringing in his ears. The words hadn't meant that much at the time but now, in hindsight, looking back on what the future had bestowed on him since then, they brought a smile to his face.

Sometimes, Billy realised later, we don't appreciate the full significance or meaning of messages we are given at the time. The key to unlocking our potential is to understand this and to remain open to all the advice we receive, remembering the messages so that when the time is right we can act upon them. In his own mind, Billy referred to these messages as 'hidden gems'.

Billy's father had been a heavy smoker – an addiction that would eventually take his life. When Billy was little, they would all travel as a family to the city to shop, especially at Christmas time. Billy would stick with his dad, and would often accompany his father outside shops as he smoked a cigarette while his mother would be inside shopping.

One day, a particularly busy Christmas shopping day, Billy recalled the shops having been full of people. There had been a sense of hustle and bustle

on the streets, the smell of roasting chestnuts, pine and Christmas had filled the air. There had been a real buzz with busy people chatting and wishing each other season's greetings. Shops and streets had been festooned with trees, lights, decorations and artificial snow. The atmosphere had been electric. Billy had loved it.

He and his dad had been standing outside one particular large department store, one they often stood outside. The main entrance was made up of 12 doors.

"See that, son," his dad had said to Billy. "See how the majority of people fight to get through the open door while others make a quicker entry by pushing on the closed door." Billy had watched for a moment to observe exactly what his father had pointed out. Some of the doors had been open, held open by customers passing through them, holding them for the people following behind, each person holding the door for a few seconds only and the door being almost suspended in a permanent open position as if broken or held on a latch.

There were other doors that had been closed. They had been unlocked, but they had remained closed. Billy had watched as one member of the public approached and chose to push on one of the unlocked closed doors. As they had passed through it, a line of people had followed them and the door had remained open. The flow of people through one of the other doors had slowed until eventually the door had closed and remained so for quite some time.

Billy had decided to test the theory. He had deliberately gone over to open a closed door to observe how people would change direction, almost falling over themselves, to gain access through the newly-opened door. He had then moved to another door that had been closed and opened that one instead.

This test had amused Billy during quite a number of 'cigarette breaks' over the years.

Billy had also remembered his father's words when he had begun applying for work. He realised that the jobs advertised on notice boards and in magazines were the jobs everyone else was applying for. The open door factor was in operation again. Therefore, Billy had taken it upon himself to research a list of companies he'd like to work for that were not advertising jobs. He had prioritised them and then written to them enquiring if they had considered taking on a newly-qualified graduate. He had reasoned that it was better to be one of a handful of candidates applying for the jobs not being advertised rather than one in a hundred applying for the jobs that were.

Top of Billy's list had been Alex's company, but the list had had about 15 other names on it. Billy had been invited to eight interviews from those letters; the other seven companies had all sent nice letters declining the application. Of the eight interviews, Billy had secured five job offers.

The day Billy had received the letter from BCH offering him employment with them under Alex's leadership was a day Billy would always remember. The offer had not been the best financially, it was not the closest to home and it was neither the latest nor the most modern of places to work, but the decision had been easy. He had accepted BCH's offer and had written letters to the other four organisations explaining his reasons for declining – he had been conscious that he might need to contact them again one day.

Billy was to uncover many more hidden gems before his time with BCH was over.

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The appraisal went well. Alex had a great way about him, being able to make feedback constructive rather than negative, and praise good work in a sincere manner that left Billy feeling motivated, inspired and with his self-esteem stronger than previously. During the appraisal, Alex highlighted Billy's strengths and weaknesses and, between them, they began to formulate a Personal Development Plan.

"So, what's your dream then, Billy?" asked Alex.

"I want to be a great leader like you!" Billy exclaimed, then blushed as he caught himself embarrassingly idolising his boss.

"That's good," responded Alex, with a warm generous smile on his face that melted Billy's embarrassment. "And when you are a great leader, Billy, who or what do you want to be leading?"

"I want to be a manager, or even have my own firm one day."

"That's a great vision, Billy. You know, I reckon one day you will."

They set out a programme that would teach Billy everything he would need to know to become a great leader. Whether it was the leader of a shop, a team or a business, Alex knew he would impart everything Billy would need.

Alex had devised a fabulous programme and had taken a number of his graduates through the process over the years. Alex had enlisted the help of colleagues and acquaintances whom he had met through a club who would each teach Billy what he needed to know. Alex would introduce Billy to them all in time.

Alex had identified that what his club had learned about recruiting and retaining members would reveal the skills and principles that would help any willing graduate become an outstanding leader. Alex did not share the details of the programme with Billy. He had learned it was best to reveal the stages one at a time, when his junior was ready.

Alex was always amazed how much the skills people learned from being a member of a club, society or organisation could benefit the workplace, and vice versa. If more people realised this, then maybe more would get more involved. Alex's wish was that one day many more people would get involved in their community, be it at work or during their leisure time, contribute to their environment and, in doing so, make the world a better place for everyone. He had learned over the years that the principles he would share with Billy would be as useful and relevant to football, golf, squash, rugby or any other sports clubs as they would be to any service club, church congregation, as well as any workplace. The leadership skills apply to all leaders, whether they are a club chair, captain of a team, team leader in the workplace or elder in a church. The list and application is endless. Alex hoped one day, through many of his students, to impact the wider communities.

"And to help you get there you need to understand the principles of 'Backward planning'..." Alex continued.

Alex was one of those successful managers who was able to get the best out of those who worked with him. Everyone who worked with him trusted him. He gave them opportunities and they repaid him with loyalty. Alex took pride in seeing those working with him grow, flourish and sometimes move on to pastures new, like fledglings flying the nest when the time was right. He knew his success would be measured by the success of those he had mentored.

"Will you tell me about 'Backward planning' please?" asked an excited Billy.

"Of course, let's get together again next week."

### Examples and observations from actual situations

Over the years, I have had the pleasure of working with some amazingly talented and dedicated people. None more so than in the sports arena where most of us know the time, effort and dedication that has to go into being successful.

I have been pleased to have worked for a number of years with several football managers in top-flight roles. Working with, on the whole, a great bunch of guys who are dedicated and committed to their sport, and in many cases fighting the rigours and fickleness of modern-day sporting leadership. On those days, I am so pleased I am not 'into' football and never have been, as it would otherwise be easy to become star struck. Frankly, it's sometimes best I don't know the names before I meet the guys.

I am reminded of one particularly nice guy who had been manager at a club in the second or third level of the English game and had recently been made redundant. We met while he was looking for work. We talked and I shared Dad's principle of pushing on unlocked doors.

About six months later, I got an SMS text message saying, "This is my new number." That exchange resulted in him sharing with me that he had 'pushed on some unlocked doors' and landed himself a job in a more significant role and club than ever before.

## KEY LEARNINGS

**Pushing on an Open Door:** This is a very interesting concept and one that is often hard for people who are not looking for work to get their head around. It is also sometimes hard for folk to see how this can apply to a club or a society. It works in two ways.

Firstly, we need to consider our club as one of those doors. If we want to attract the largest number of people through our door, we need to demonstrate that our door is open. We need to find the ways that allow the people who would walk through an open door to walk through our door, and ensure that those who would avoid the unlocked closed door do not perceive our door to be locked and so closed to them. The fear of rejection will often mean most of the population will not approach a door and try it to see if it is open or not.

This makes a clear distinction from those clubs or groups who thrive on exclusivity and prefer there to be a perception that they are only open to a select band. And, in many cases, this works for them nicely.

Secondly, we need to consider that there are groups of prospective members in our communities and we need to push on the unlocked doors that get us access to these prospective members in our communities when other groups are being held up in the crowds at the open doors. We need to establish how to tap into the public who want to belong to something and are open to membership but others do not make the effort to push on their door. We must go where others fear to go.





## **Chapter Two**

Crossing Streams  
and Backward Planning