

LEADERSHIP

— by Rick Valkvinge, Swarmwise

1. Inspire
2. Communicate
3. Facilitate
4. Take Responsibility
5. Archive/Capture Knowledge

New ways of organizing go beyond just breaking the old rules into downright shredding them — leaving executives in the dust, wondering how that band of poor, ragtag, disorganized activists could possibly have beaten their rich, well-structured organization.

A swarm organization is a decentralized, collaborative effort of volunteers that looks like a hierarchical, traditional organization from the outside. It is built by a small core that constructs a scaffolding of go-to people, enabling a large number of volunteers to cooperate on a common goal in numbers not possible before the net was available. The typical Internet community methods of inclusion, when combined with strong leadership, work much better to achieve global change than working with no leader and little more than a common flag.

1. You also need to release the control of your brand and its messages.
2. You need to delegate authority to the point where anybody can make almost any decision for the entire organization.
3. You need to accept and embrace that people in the organization will do exactly as they please, and the only way to lead is to inspire them to want to go where you want the organization as a whole to go.

Timing, social context, and message are crucial — but if you have those three, your initial swarm will form like bees to honey in hours.

Focus on CAN DO: everybody can find something he or she likes to do, all the time, off a suggested palette that furthers the swarm's goals — and there is nobody there to tell people how things must or may not be done.

A key aspect of the swarm is that it is open to all people who want to share in the workload. Actually, it is more than open — everybody in the whole world is encouraged to pick work items off a public list, without asking anybody's permission, and just start doing them.

The advantage of this approach is that resources of the swarm aren't spent keeping people out of it, but are spent getting people into it.

Everything is transparent by default. Financial records are transparent for all to see. Discussions about strategies and tactics are transparent for all to see (and open for all to participate in).

Conflicts are transparent for all to see. This is because all discussions happen in places where everyone **can** see them. This provides for trust and confidence. Since everybody can see all the information and all the discussions in the entire organization, it provides a very powerful sense of inclusion.

All swarms are a matter of quantity. Quantity of people. Like army ants in the Amazon rainforest, it is a matter of overpowering your opponents with sheer biomass through superior ability of organization and ability to channel volunteer energy.

Of course, there were other factors in society to this conflict as well, the underlying themes being freedoms of speech and expression as well as general net liberties. But if you start talking about abstract concepts, you'll just have yawns among your prospective volunteers. We'll need a large recruitment surface with concepts that are easy to relate to people's everyday lives in order to grow the swarm to critical mass.

Your idea must be possible to break down into a kind of math: how many people engaged at a minimum level, equivalent to voting, buying a product, or signing a petition, do you need to succeed?

A traditional method would be to go about an advertising campaign to generate interest. Working swarmwise, though, two words about the idea of an advertising campaign: **forget it**. If your idea doesn't generate enthusiasm on its own, no amount of whitewashing is going to create the grassroots activism that you need to form a swarm.

KEY ASPECTS OF ANY SWARM

1. **Tangible:** You need to post an outline of the goals you intend to meet, when, and how.
2. **Credible:** After having presented your daring goal, you need to present it as totally doable. Bonus points if nobody has done it before.
3. **Inclusive:** There must be room for participation by every spectator who finds it interesting, and they need to realize this on hearing about the project.
4. **Epic:** Finally, you must set out to change the entire world for the better — or at least make a major improvement for a lot of people.

The idea doesn't need to be polished. The important thing is to put that stake in the ground, start attracting people, and start working your way to the goal.

The swarm's very first task will be to self-organize, and so there needs to be something to be done right away.

It needs to be a task that looks challenging but is doable; it needs to be a task where you can provide for internal competition between the subdivisions that you have created; and it needs to be a task where everybody can see the clear benefit to the swarm upon its completion.

A swarm organization is made up of people who know other people and who **choose** to work together. Therefore, getting people to know other people should be an overarching goal of your activities at this point.

While the effective swarm consists almost entirely of loosely knit activists, there is a core of people — a scaffolding for the swarm — that requires a more formal organization.

Rather, its role and value is in supporting the other 95 percent of the organization — the swarm — which makes its own decisions based on the values you communicate and looks to the scaffolding only when assistance, support, or resources are needed.

Biological and anthropological research shows that no more than seven people work closely with one another in a given tight context.

The largest is 150. There is no relationship between these numbers. The number seven appears to come from a practical limit to the effort spent on maintaining a group. The more elusive number 150 appears to be a limit hardwired into our brains, also known as the Dunbar Limit. It is the size of most tribes, the size of army companies and appears everywhere across human society.

The effect on building your organization is the same as in every other successful organization: you need to know that groups above 150 people in size will lose the social bonding required for efficiency and, well, **the fun**.

The new part of the organisation is the entire swarm around the scaffolding, and the role that these officers — these geographical and functional leaders — must take in order to support it. One key insight is that the responsibility of the swarm leaders is not so much managerial as it is **janitorial**. Nobody answers to them, and their task is to make sure that the swarm has everything it needs to self-organize and work its miracles.

This is also a key mechanism in swarm organizations. You cannot and should not try to tell anybody in the swarm what to do; rather, your role is to set goals and ambitions, ambitions that don't stop short of changing the entire world for the better.

Your passion for the swarm's mission is going to be key in making this happen. You need to constantly show your passion for the end goal, and those who see and pick up on your passion will seek out things they can do to further it — all on their own.

A swarm grows by people who are talking to people at the individual activist level. You don't have the luxury of putting out ads, but your passion and desire to change the world for the better (along with a complete denial of what other people would call the impossibility of the task) make

people talk among one another. This is how your swarm grows: one conversation at a time, one person at a time.

The typical support functions needed are PR/media, activism, swarmcare, and web.

Bureaucracy and administration will very easily swell to become self-justifying, even in a swarm of activists. Do not let this happen. Keep reminding people that meetings are there for the purpose of synchronizing the work done to advance the external purpose of the swarm, and that every minute spent with each other is a minute not spent changing the world.

Leading by doing is necessary here, but not sufficient; you need to periodically repeat that one of the core values of the swarm is that we **trust** each other to work for the swarm in the ways that we can do so as individuals. It turns out that one thing that makes swarms so outstanding in efficiency is their **diversity**. People come from all walks of life, and once they realize they have a full mandate to work for the swarm in the ways that they can, they will just do so.

Leadership is primarily about psychology, and has very little to do with a paycheck and much more to do with deeply ingrained social wiring in human beings.

The trick, then, is how to communicate the vision. If I had to give a quick answer to that question, it would be **“with all the passion you can muster, from the depths of your heart, through the fire of your voice and the determination of the depth of your eyes.”**

You need to be positively radiant with your desire to change the world for the better, and, above all, communicate three values:

- We can do this.
- We are going to change the world for the better.
- This is going to be hard work for us, but totally worth it

The swarm might need that crazy 5 percent of activists to succeed in a very specialized social context that only they understand, in order to create the perfect storm of different social contexts that cooperate toward succeeding with the swarm’s end goal. In this way, the swarm will take initiatives all of its own that further the swarm’s end goal. Activists will gravitate to where they see that they can contribute. And from the founder’s perspective, beautiful things just happen without any need for central control or orders.

We therefore work within a swarm meritocracy, so that no-one gets to determine what others shall do and not do. This concept — that no person can have a say over any other — is part of the swarm’s core values. We instead aim for the principle of teaching by example, and allowing others to learn through observation. In a swarm, people will copy the behavior of those with a perceived influence.

Asking permission is asking somebody else to take accountability for your decision.

Once you realize this - that some percentage of things will go wrong no matter how many safeguards and checkpoints you put in place, and that this percentage is fairly constant beyond the most basic of sanity checks - then you can go into a comfortable zen mode with regard to trusting and empowering others.

For if it doesn't matter how many safeguards you put in place against PR gaffes, there is no point to bother with such safeguards in the first place. Instead, you can focus on optimizing the swarm for speed, trust, and scalability, and we can communicate to the swarm that mistakes will happen, and when they do, we fix them, learn from them, and move on.

My approach for a very basic sanity check was to have three people agree on an idea as good for the swarm. One person can come up with ludicrous ideas, but I've never seen two more people agree on such ideas. This was simple, communicable, and effective, yet enough to retain the full speed and agility of the swarm.

But this attitude has another very positive effect. By communicating clearly that in this swarm, you're not only allowed to make mistakes, but expected to do so from time to time, you encourage the bold attitude required to change the world. You need not only your own crazy ideas, but the crazy ideas of many others to succeed, and you need to create the climate where they are welcome and rewarded.

MISTAKES ALLOWED HERE

This part is absolutely paramount to communicate to your officers in the scaffolding supporting the swarm — that mistakes are not only allowed, but expected, and when they happen, we learn from them. (It's a different thing to tolerate somebody making the same mistake over and over, or sabotaging the swarm deliberately, but that's not what we're talking about here.) When forming a swarm, everybody is venturing into unknown territory. By definition, it's a trial-and-error venture. Everybody is breaking new ground in changing the world in a way that has not been tried before — both on the individual and the organizational level. Make it possible to learn and try again, learn again and try again, and so on, and communicate that this is not only allowed, but expected. Make it possible to make those failures in as short a time as possible, minimizing the iteration cycle, and your success will come sooner.

With all this said of a meritocracy or a “do-ocracy,” there are some instances where parts of the swarm really may need to work as a cohesive group, rather than as individuals following the law of two feet.

THE MAGIC OF THE CONSENSUS CIRCLE

One good mechanism for arriving at a decision in a (defined) group is called a consensus circle. Rather than focusing on fear of losing through voting, which will cause people who fear losing to

just stall what they think is a bad decision, the consensus circle focuses on including everybody and getting people into a constructive mindset. Here's the important part: **everybody has the power of veto over a final decision**. One single "no" from any participant is a final "no" for the group as a whole. Therefore, nobody will leave the room as a loser. This creates two very powerful mechanisms: the first is that it forces everybody to find a solution that is acceptable to everybody, and the second is that it slowly releases all fears of leaving the room as a loser, creating a completely different mind-set from the one surfacing when fighting internally.

The lack of understandable, logical rules comes from the simple fact that people are neither understandable nor logical by nature. They are social and passionate.

The swarm is a disorganization by design. Some would prefer to call it a self-organization. In either case, there's nobody assigning everybody to boxes, tasks, and activities. That's why the organization works so well.

Once the swarm has any money to speak of, a sizeable chunk of it should be devoted to supporting individual activists' initiatives where they can reclaim expenses. The swarm lives and dies with the creativity and initiatives of its activists.

The key thing to understand from a leadership position is that **attention is reward**.

It follows that we reward exemplary activist behavior with our attention, and completely ignore things that we want to see less of. Anything that we focus on in the swarm, for whatever reason, will grow in the swarm. Therefore, if there are behaviors we don't want to see growing, we should ideally pretend they aren't even there — block them out from our conscious radar, and spend time rewarding other kinds of behavior.

So what behavior do we want to see growing? Initiatives. Even initiatives that fail. Supporting others. Actually, this one is quite important. I frequently emphasize that **helping others excel is just as valuable as excelling on your own**. The criteria for rewards tend to converge on three key factors — helping the energy, the focus, and the passion of the swarm.

Every exclusion is a failure. Just because you don't see any people being formally excluded, that doesn't mean people don't feel excluded. **Every exclusion is a failure**.

In the process of running the organization, you will occasionally discover people who don't feel they get enough attention from you personally for their ideas on how to run the swarm. (Attention is reward. They feel they're not rewarded enough.) This is quite likely due to you simply disagreeing with their ideas and not wanting to nurture them.

If you pick away a couple of key people in this group and recognize them for good earlier work — unrelated to the maverick's yells — you will isolate the maverick, and the disturbance will lose critical mass.

SURVIVING GROWTH UNLIKE ANYTHING THE MBAs HAVE EVER SEEN

Following a high-profile event, your swarm just tripled in size in a week. You have twenty thousand new activists — new colleagues — that are all waiting for instructions from you, personally. They're waiting for instructions from you because your name is the only one they know of. There are no MBA classes on how to handle this situation: those people talk about the challenges you encounter when growing by more than 10 percent a year. This is how you handle 200 percent growth in a week.

In a swarm organization, the organizational culture cannot be communicated from person to person as the organization grows — it must be actively communicated centrally, and repeatedly communicated as new people keep joining.

Having fun in the organization is crucial to success. You need to make sure that you and your colleagues, all several thousand of them, have fun.

Success in a swarm doesn't happen smoothly and fluidly. It happens in hard-to-predict enormous bursts. You may have spoken about a subject for a good year or two, seeing no return on your efforts at all. Then, something happens, and more or less overnight, tens of thousands of people realize you have been right all along and join your swarm for the fight.

The second part of the challenge is to immediately get out of grinding mode when this catalyzing event happens, and go into an intense recruitment mode to take care of all the new activists, as described in this chapter. Then, as the recruitment burst fades, you teach all the new activists to grind public opinion in the same way as you had been doing, the swarm now having a much larger surface area than before the growth burst.

The key to a successful swarm is to be better at understanding and using massive-scale social dynamics than your competitors.

It is the offline discussions we want to cover the swarm's topics; they are much stronger in terms of emotional attachment and intensity between people. Thus, we need to use the reach of online tools and communication to make people want to talk about the swarm's goals in their respective offline environments, where the possibility of recruiting new activists is much, much better than on a random web page.

GROWING ON THE EDGES

A swarm only grows on its fuzzy outer edge: at the swarm's center, where you are, everybody is already involved at the highest activity level. This leads to an important insight: the people who are most active can't recruit any new activists to the swarm themselves by talking to their friends.

HEARTBEAT MESSAGES

To enable such recruitment at the edge, a couple of key components must be communicated to the entire swarm at regular intervals in heartbeat messages. This must be done by the people with the most experience in talking about the swarm, typically once a week. The heartbeat messages should contain at least the following:

1. **Newsflow** - send a weekly letter with newsflow, sample rhetoric, urgency, and confidence.
2. **Sample rhetoric** - their confidence can be increased in many ways — one of the most straightforward and successful is to supply direct quotes that can initiate a conversation, or sample responses to typical questions.
3. **Confidence** - the people who are in a position to recruit must also be supplied with the confidence to do so
4. **Sense of urgency** - If they believe in the swarm and its mission, part of that mission must be to grow the swarm itself and to understand how such growth contributes to the swarm's end success

A swarm grows by people talking to one another, one conversation at a time. The Swedish Pirate Party grew to fifty thousand members just like that: one person at a time, one conversation at a time. **These conversations are the key to the long-term success of the swarm.**

UNDERSTANDING THE ACTIVATION LADDER

In any swarm, it is essential to know where the paths to individual success coincide with the success of the swarm's mission, and to bring new recruits into alignment with one of these paths as soon as possible.

This is key to **making it easy for people to move to the highly active center** of the swarm: as we want to activate people in the swarm, it's important to understand that activation is a gradual process with many steps on the activation ladder.

The crucial action that is needed from the people leading the swarm is to identify as many steps as possible on the activation ladder, and make each of these steps as easy and accessible as possible.

There are several key things that need to be done. Some of the least obvious are to always make sure that all people in the swarm can respond meaningfully to questions about the swarm's purpose from people who are just hearing about the swarm — normal social growth should never be underestimated — and that there are always plenty of empty boxes in the organizational chart for people who want to take formal and real responsibility for the swarm's daily operations.

Your leadership is not enough. **You must also provide the means for your officers and local leaders to activate people on their own.**

A lot of people in general want to be on the winning team in most contexts and will adapt their behavior to match it. Therefore, if you can make your swarm look like the winning team, regardless of your actual strength, 90 percent of your work is done.

Again, most people will match their actions and opinions to be at least compatible with their perception of the public opinion. Control the public perception of who's the winning team, and you become the winning team.

RESPECTING ANONYMITY

The more information you require about your activists, the fewer activists you'll have.

You will find that there are many people that want to change the status quo that these rich organizations uphold, but you'll also find that a lot of people don't want to sign their name publicly to that aspiration — several of them may even work for the organizations in question, or be suppliers to them, or otherwise dependent on their goodwill.

REWARDING THE LONG TAIL

The correct question to ask is, "How can we reward people for discussing our topic (values, politics, services, products)?" **Note that I say discuss, not promote.** There is a world of difference. People are hyperallergic to positive messages that have been vetted or promoted by a suited-and-tied PR department with shiny blingtoothed smiles. It's the worst thing there is, second only to trying to ski through a revolving door. You want to reward people for mentioning your name, no matter whether they like you or not. Again, this is counter to traditional unidirectional marketing of the shove-down-the-throat kind, but goes very well with the importance of message diversity and how crucial that diversity is to success and respect.

When you release control of your brand, you can achieve wonders. The same goes for rewarding the long tail — as in, the people who aren't normally seen — for speaking about your swarm or your topics.

This is one of the mechanisms behind our becoming the most-discussed party in the entire Swedish blogosphere. When you give up the illusory control of your brand — *which you never had anyway* — and reward people for discussing you, unconditional of the context, they will keep discussing you and your topics, services, or products. That is exactly what you want to happen.

People do not expect to get comments and cheers from leaders of political parties or other significant organizations. You can use this non-expectation to your strong advantage to build a following.

You need to search for new activists or potential activists every day, at least once a day, and just acknowledge that you see them — in your own preferred way.

This will be challenging to your mood and psyche, but you need to respond, and you need to be nice and polite. You may never turn off the person who is rude to you and angry at your values, but you will take every other reader on the site by complete surprise, and they will become potential activists in your swarm. Odds are you'll even get positive responses from people other than the initial aggressor, written out in cleartext to your nice and polite reply.

OLD MEDIA

As much as people would like to disrupt the world by going their own way entirely, you cannot change an existing system without also becoming a little part of it in order to change it from the inside. Everybody can change something, but nobody can change everything. Your swarm's focus probably isn't on changing the way old media works, so this is how you deal with them.

Getting your quotes and your swarm's name into old media is really as easy as helping the reporters write a great story: put yourself in the reporters' position, and think about what they would need at a given moment.

So what does a press release look like, and what is its purpose? A press release, in its simplest form, is just mail sent to a reporter. (You will need to maintain a list of reporters writing on topics related to your swarm.) The template we used in the Swedish Pirate Party looked like this:

Press release — organization name — date and time

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Header

Lead paragraph (opens with location)

Quote

Fact

Quote

Fact

End

Quote

For More Information

About the Organization

ENDS

The press release should read as closely to a finished article as possible. The more the old media reporter can cut and paste, the more work you are doing for them, and the higher the probability of your becoming part of the mainstream story.

Be provocative. If you're not making somebody angry, you're probably not doing anything useful. Have fun and make your adversaries angry at the same time.

Trim the response time down to thirty minutes or less, and remember that people will want to polish it to no end, which costs time. Keep the spelling correct and the message good enough; time is of the essence here.

Old media are not interested in what people think or feel; they are *interested in what people do*. There is some room for people commenting on what other people do, but there is never editorial room to say what people think without a context of somebody who did something.

Gandhi once said, "First they ignore you, then they ridicule you, then they fight you, then you win." This is eerily accurate in old media's portrayal of any disruptive or provocative swarm.

You need to teach the media subswarm to write quotes and attribute them to you, the swarm leader or founder, for these reasons. If you've taken enough part in the media group and written enough press releases yourself, the subswarm will know the kind of things you say and be able to send out a press release with quotes in your name without needing you as a bottleneck. You'll be amazed at how smart you can sound when you let other people make up the quotes you say without asking you first.

You never, ever send an op-ed to more than one newspaper in some kind of hope of getting it published in more than one location. Newspapers hate people who do that. You pick one paper that you think will have the right reach and audience, and then address that newspaper only. If they decline to publish, you are free to move on to other papers, and only then.

Your reward for playing by the oldmedia rules is that you get a large audience for your message. You usually don't get paid. Don't expect to get paid, and don't ask. Your payment is exposure of your message to their audience.

BEYOND SUCCESS

In many ways, success can be harder to handle than failure, because it sets expectations most people have never felt. These are some of the most important experiences on how to not make a wild success crash on its maiden flight into a painful failure.

As the founder, it is your job to explain that when things appear to be at their peak, all those lavish jobs and expensive toys are farther away than ever. At that point in time, the swarm has two of its toughest challenges ever to overcome — to remain steadfast on the extroverted track,

despite the distracting glimmering riches on the horizon, and the fact that the visibility and success will fade even if the swarm continues exactly on its current course of action, and this can be a very tough thing to face emotionally.

This is painful for everybody involved. So keep the swarm on track, and do remind them of that saying in the entertainment business: no time is as tough as the year after the year you're hot — and that year will come around, as certainly as the calendar tells you it will.

When you know what it takes to get from A to B, the rest is just execution and inspiration. Therefore, the first step is to tell the world that you're going to go from A to B, and say what you think it takes to do so, as we saw in chapter 2. A hurdle is never impossible once you know exactly what it looks like — only when you fear its height because you've never taken the effort to find out how difficult it actually is to climb.