Developing a Humanity+ chapter: tips and advice

About this document

This is a working document, collaboratively edited, that seeks to collect the best tips and advice to help Humanity+ chapters

- Get started
- Grow and have more impact
- Take advantage of useful tools, processes, and platforms
- Avoid pitfalls that have slowed down other chapters.

The advice in this document is intended to be applicable to all groups within the overall Humanity+ umbrella, whether or not these groups

- Have an official affiliation with the global Humanity+ organization
- Operate under an explicit “transhumanist” branding
- Use a formal structure or are a loose informal body.

The advice may also prove useful to related groups outside the Humanity+ umbrella, such as new Futurist groups.

Editing process

Contributors to this document are encouraged to add questions they think deserve answers, even if they’re not sure what the best answers are. Contributors are also encouraged to extend and improve existing answers.

To be added to the set of people who can edit this document, please email the document owner.

Sources consulted in writing this document, plus recommended follow-up reading

- The Student Leadership Guide of the Humanity+ Student Network (PDF)
- “Swarmwise - the tactical guide to changing the world” by Rick Falkvinge
- [Other suggestions welcome here]

This document also reflects experiences from running UKH+ and London Futurists (which has grown over six years to have an online membership of around 3000 futurists).

Advice in brief

It’s easy to get started

Wherever you live, there are likely other people with an interest in transhumanism-related questions living around you. Experience shows that as soon as someone steps forward and

says “Hi! I want to arrange a meetings to talk about the future of mankind!”, this always creates interest and people come together. We can be sure that the people are there. The only thing that is needed is to bring them together and get some type of ‘critical mass’, i.e. a handful of individuals who are willing to help coordinate further meetings.

Platforms such as Facebook and Meetup make it easier than ever to start a new group.

[Other advice to be summarised from the remainder of the document]

Speaker meetings

Finding speakers

One way to grow your chapter is by having interesting and inspiring speakers address your meetings. Bear in mind that:

- Good writers aren’t always good speakers (and vice versa) - so do some research on potential speakers beforehand
- You should communicate your expectations to speakers in advance, to avoid misunderstandings (see this page for one example of “advice to potential speakers”).

You can often find out about potential speakers by viewing online videos of them speaking at other events.

There are also useful lists of speakers who have a good track record, e.g. on the BrighterBrains website.

Chairing meetings

The chair of the meeting has an important role:

- If needed, to keep time on behalf of the speaker
- To prevent the discussion from being dominated by a small number of vocal attendees
- To gently encourage other audience members to add their voices to the discussion
- To draw the line under interesting tangential lines of debate, at the right time, in order to return to topics of greater interest to the audience as a whole.

The audience will appreciate the opportunity to ask questions to the speaker, and (ideally) to mingle informally with him/her afterwards, so timetable that in advance.

Variants on speaker meetings

Instead of having a single lead speaker, consider some of the following variations:

- Arrange for a “formal responder”, to speak from the floor after the main speaker has finished
- Organize a formal debate, with speeches for and against a specified motion
- Invite a panel of speakers, all speaking on a similar topic, with each speaker restricted to

18 minutes (as standard for TED talks).

Note that these variants require greater amounts of work than having a single lead speaker.

Another variant is to organize a reading group, that works its way, meeting by meeting, through a book, or a pre-agreed set of written material.

Alternatively, each attendee at a meeting should be encouraged beforehand to be ready to say something briefly about a recent news item or online magazine article (such as from hplusmagazine, io9, or singularityhub) that personally caught their attention.

Handling audience drop-outs

It can be hard to know how large a room to book, to cope with the number of people who will turn up to an event, since this number can be a lot less than the number who pre-register.

The following rule of thumb may be useful:

- Of the people who pay in advance to attend, expect a drop-out rate of up to 20%
- Of the people who don't pay in advance to attend, expect a drop-out rate of around 50%
- Expect a number of walk-ins, who haven't registered in advance.

This can translate into the following rule: take the average of the number of people who have paid in advance, and the total number of pre-registrations (whether paid in advance or not).

Project activities

Rather than just being a discussion forum, some chapters may want to achieve impact via undertaking projects. Possibilities include:

- Jointly designing and creating a new application or device (hardware and/or software)
- Organizing a play performance, poetry reading, or other arts production
- Campaigning for a change in policy or legislation (at local or regional levels)
- Writing and issuing a press release
- Raising public awareness via a public demonstration and/or public speaking
- Create and maintain a regular newsletter
- Creating and maintaining a web presence, via e.g. YouTube
- Running a prize essay contest, or a hackathon with a prize.

Social activities

Groups benefit from having a social aspect as well as formal processes. Consider the following possibilities:

- Moving from a formal presentation venue to a nearby bar or coffee shop, after a speaker meeting has finished

- A “road trip” in which a number of your members travel together to an event in a different location - for example, a Humanity+ conference overseas or in a different state
- A philanthropic initiative, such as raising funds for SENS or for Humanity+.

Useful platforms and tools

Facebook

Facebook is *the* easiest way to discover if there are other people with an interest in transhumanism in your country or area. To set up a Facebook page or group costs nothing and takes less than 5 minutes. Add a couple of cool pictures to draw attention, add some friends and post a few news item in the group to make it come to life and then post your group on your wall and in some of the large, existing transhumanism related facebook groups (such as for example Singularity Network or Posthuman Network) and say, *“Hey, are there any other transhumanists from my city here? Then please join this local group and we can arrange live meetings where we live!”* Then as your FB group gets a membership of more than 20 people, it is super simple just to create an event in the group and coordinate a meeting in your area.

Meetup.com

The tool meetup.com has a good track record in helping to grow communities. If you choose the description of your organization carefully, meetup will automatically invite people from the broader meetup.com membership to take a look at your site. If you personally join similar local groups that cover areas adjacent to transhumanism, meetup.com will be more likely to invite members of these other groups to check our your one.

Note that you will have to pay meetup.com regular subscriptions to keep your status valid - at the moment it’s $12 per month so not a killer.

Create your own YouTube channel

[Give more details here]

Google Hangouts on Air

[Give more details here]

Other ways to publicise your events

Consider the following:

- Event pages on Facebook and on Google+
- The events listing service on Hplus Magazine.

Handling press enquiries

[Add material here]

Financial matters

Sources of sponsorship

Student groups may be able to obtain some funding from their university.

With care, some commercial sponsorship may be obtained.

[Add material here]

Should groups operate formal paid membership schemes?

[This question needs an answer]

Organizational structure

Should groups appoint a formal board of directors?

[This question needs an answer]

Setting up a group of Advisors

[Give some advice here]

Some pitfalls to avoid

Burn-out

Groups take ongoing attention and support, from their leaders, in order to survive. Don't burn yourself out by a huge blaze of activity in the first few months, in a way that leaves you unable to continue to look after the group. Plan a series of events for up to six months ahead.

Naive over-ambition

By all means have grand plans for the longer term, but you should anticipate that you will need to take many interim steps of progress, interleaved with periods in which nothing seems to happen (or momentum seems to go backwards).

If you do create a grand vision, be sure to couple it with a roadmap of steps which you plan to take towards that vision.

Moreover, don't be afraid to revise that roadmap (and the vision) in the light of your experience. (In the business world, this is known as a "pivot".)

Failure to communicate

Even in periods in which your group has no formal activities, it's useful to issue occasional newsletters or other forms of communication, to remind your members about the group, and to help maintain their interest.

If members hear nothing at all about your group, it may drop out of their minds completely.

On the other hand, be careful not to give the impression of spam communication, by repeating the same messages too many times via different media.

An obsession with formalism

Many successful organizations follow a so-called “lean” model, in which formalism is kept to a minimum.

It’s a danger sign when your group spends more time discussing and managing its processes than it does discussing and managing its projects.

Avoid making rules to cover every eventuality, or obsessing about the minutiae of the language in your documents. Instead, restrict your rules to the things that most influence the effectiveness of your group. This may include:

- Respect for other members
- Rules about handling finances
- Legal requirements for your location
- Requirements from sponsoring organizations or university authorities.

Personality clashes

Successful teams usually incorporate a range of different personality types. However, people who have the self-confidence to embrace outsider views of the future (e.g. transhumanism) in the face of social opposition, often deprioritize the importance of maintaining social harmony. In short, transhumanism has more than its fair share of extreme personalities. This may explain why transhumanist groups have a tendency towards personality clashes and schisms. (It’s the same with many other areas of activism.)

For this reason, it’s useful to include on your leadership team at least some people who have a low personal ego, good empathy, and good bridge-building skills.

Leadership team meetings should review, from time to time, the set of generally approved behaviours. This includes:

- It’s OK to criticise ideas, but try not to criticise people
- Every negative critical comment (e.g. “this will not work”) should be matched by a positive comment (e.g. “here’s what might work”)
- Avoidance of rumour and gossip; prefer instead fact-based discussion.

Someone who persists with a divisive personality should be:

- Encouraged to take a different role in the team, in which they can personally shine (even though it’s different to what they initially thought they wanted to do)
- Or, in the last resort, managed out of the group altogether (ideally parting on amicable

terms).

Poor moderation of discussion within your group

[Give some advice here]

Lack of succession planning

[Give some advice here]

Legal pitfalls

[Give some advice here]

Partnerships and liaisons

It can be useful to organize joint meetings or projects with other groups that have overlapping visions and goals with yours. Examples to consider include:

- The Quantified Self movement
- Bio-hackers
- Science Fiction enthusiasts
- Pro-rationality groups, such as LessWrong
- Futurist meetups, such as chapters of the World Future Society
- Groups concerned about various existential risks
- Campaigners for digital rights reforms (e.g. the Pirate Party)
- Campaigners for drug law reform and the defense of cognitive liberty
- Campaigners for a Basic Income Guarantee
- Campaigners on behalf of sexual and gender minorities
- Campaigners for reform of regulations governing medical innovations
- Campaigners for social reform, e.g. via decentralized autonomous organizations.

To be clear, joint activity doesn't imply that you share all the goals of the other organization.

Also seek to maintain links with like-minded Humanity+ groupings in other parts of the world. For example, European transhumanist groups are invited to join the Google+ EH+ community.

Formal affiliation with Humanity+

The system of formal affiliation for Humanity+ Chapters is currently undergoing revision. It is expected that new processes will be put in place some time in 2015. See the Humanity+ Plan.