



**Ron Nehring**

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# **EXCELLENCE IN LOCAL POLITICS**

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**Your field guide to build a powerful  
local political organization**

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This guide, published by the Leadership Institute, serves as a comprehensive resource for organizational leaders seeking to transform and strengthen their political committees. It is based on the case study of the Republican Party of San Diego County's remarkable turnaround beginning in 2001. This transformation was achieved through the implementation of strategic organizational principles, disciplined execution, and effective volunteer engagement.

The purpose of this guide is to provide valuable insights and practical strategies that can be adapted by any political committee, regardless of party affiliation. It aims to demonstrate how sound organizational practices and focused leadership can drive success in the competitive field of

politics. The case study presented here highlights key concepts such as defining organizational roles, maintaining discipline through strategic planning, engaging and motivating volunteers, and ensuring robust fundraising and financial management.

This guide is not intended to endorse, support, or oppose any candidate or political party. Rather, it is designed to serve as a resource for conservative leaders and activists who are committed to building effective and resilient organizations capable of achieving their goals.

By learning from the experiences detailed in this case study, leaders can gain practical knowledge and inspiration to implement positive changes within their own committees and campaigns.



## Ron Nehring

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Ron Nehring first came to the Leadership Institute in 1989 while studying at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Over the years, he participated in seven Leadership Institute training programs, honing the skills that would propel his career in politics and government.

In 1996, Ron became the Executive Director of the Republican Party of San Diego County. Five years later, he was elected Chairman, where leadership transformed the party from a state of dysfunction into one of the most effective and well-funded county Republican committees in the nation. His success in San Diego paved the way for his election as President of the California Republican County Chairman's Association. He later advanced to Vice Chairman and ultimately Chairman of the California Republican Party.

During his tenure as state Chairman, Ron also served on the Republican National

Committee, where he chaired the RNC's State Chairman's Committee. In this role, he drove the exchange of ideas and best practices among Republican state chairmen across the country, fostering a collaborative and innovative environment.

Beyond his party roles, Ron has served as a trustee of the Grossmont Union High School District and was elected the Republican nominee for Lt. Governor of California in 2014. He also played a prominent role as national spokesman in Senator Ted Cruz's 2016 presidential campaign.

Today, Ron Nehring is the Director of International Programs at the Leadership Institute. He is a sought-after lecturer on campaigns, communications, fundraising, and related topics, sharing his expertise at Leadership Institute programs across the United States and around the world.

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# **EXCELLENCE IN LOCAL POLITICS**

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**T**he purpose of a great, conservative political party is to preserve individual liberty while you implement conservative ideas to improve people's quality of life.

Around the world, empirically, where conservative ideas are implemented – good schools, free enterprise, property rights, a fair judicial system, low and fair taxes, the freedom to work, save and invest, freedom from corruption – people prosper.

A sound conservative political party improves the human condition by electing candidates who, once in office, will implement these policies.

A strong, highly organized and effective party organization at the local, branch level is a powerful tool to implement conservative ideas by electing conservatives to office. In many competitive elections, success or failure can depend on which party succeeds in building and maintaining a superior organization.

From 2001 to 2007, I served as Chairman of the Republican Party of San Diego County. By implementing many of the political technology principles I learned as a student and later as a faculty member for the Leadership Institute, my colleagues and I succeeded in building one of the strongest local Republican Party organizations in America.

This was a daunting undertaking. My predecessor had been removed from office just months after being re-elected, candidates would avoid the party organization, meetings were small and unproductive, and donor confidence had been shattered.

Working together as a team, guided by sound organizational principles, the Republican Party of San Diego County was transformed from a bankrupt and dysfunctional organization into a powerful organization - an organization capable of focusing the combined resources of thousands of volunteers and donors behind conservative candidates to win back competitive districts that had since fallen to the opposition.

This manuscript provides a guide for the techniques my colleagues and I used to transform the Republican Party of San Diego County. The principles, strategies and tactics we applied are highly adaptable to any conservative political party branch at the local level.

Those who have recently taken over a political organization in rough shape can take encouragement from the reality that every problem one encounters in such a leadership role has been met by someone else previously. This guide is intended to provide inspiration, and a roadmap, to overcome obstacles, and advance conservative candidates through superior organization and communication.



# DEFINING THE PARTY'S ROLE

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**Dream no small dreams,  
for they have no power to  
move the hearts of men.**

Goethe

Serving as a party leader is a serious responsibility, and one which often does not involve getting the credit one deserves. Successful candidates tend to be credited for their wins, while the party often gets the blame for losses. Yet this reality must not stop capable leaders from taking the reins of leadership to build a strong party to in turn transform our ideas into action.

In accepting the role of county Republican leader, I determined that considering the amount of time and effort the role demands, I would aim for the top. The goal became the creation of a “world class” Republican Party in San Diego County.

Goethe’s advice against dreaming small dreams is compelling – no one is inspired to volunteer, donate or put their credibility on the line in order to make marginal improvements. To draw the amount of funds, volunteer hours, and talent we would need, the party leadership had to provide inspiration with a powerful vision – that of building a world class Republican Party we can be proud of.

Success in transforming the party from a dysfunctional one to one capable of generating victories required first narrowly defining the party’s responsibility. Any organization has limits on resources, time, and money – you can’t try to boil the ocean. If you try to do everything

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**Whatever is worth  
doing at all, is worth  
doing well.**

Philip Stanhope, 4th Earl of Chesterfield

anyone has ever had a good idea for, you will fail at everything.

Concurrently, the party is never the sole player on the public policy playing field. There are roles for the county party, state party, candidate campaigns, issue groups, and others. Party leadership had to carefully define our zone of responsibility, then excel at it.

First and foremost, a local political party is a campaign organization. It is not government. The party achieves its policy objectives through electing candidates to office, not pretending to be the government. The county party’s role is to wage the Republican campaign in support of our candidates.

In this role, the Republican Party would take responsibility for increasing the number of members, mobilizing those members to vote, and maximizing the number of party members who would vote for party candidates.

By taking on these responsibilities, candidate campaigns are freed of this burden and can focus their resources on winning over the non-Republican voters they must have for victory.

In years when the Republican Party was weak and dysfunctional, responsibility for reaching all the voters necessary for victory fell to the candidate campaigns. Given the



short-term nature of candidate campaigns – most only last a few months – taking on the role of reaching 100% of the voters they need for victory often proved too much.

A strong local party organization lifts its candidates by carrying the burden of persuading and mobilizing party members for the candidates. The individual candidate campaigns can then concentrate on winning over the rest.

This division of labor provided the basis for defining the party’s five core functions:

- Voter registration to increase the size of the Republican base.
- Turnout operations to ensure Republican voters participated in

the election, primarily through a massive precinct organization focused on in-person contact.

- Endorsing and nominating candidates for office at every level and informing Republican voters so they know for whom to vote in the election.
- Volunteer recruitment and mobilization to carry out the first three functions.
- Fundraising to enable the implementation of the above.

When a local party organization focuses relentlessly on these core functions, it succeeds. When it fails to do so, or is otherwise distracted, the party opens the door for its opponents to win.

## STRATEGIC PLAN

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**The biggest complaint in politics is, ‘Why wasn’t I consulted?’**

Harold MacMillan, Prime Minister,  
United Kingdom, 1957-63 Conservative Party

To define our role and maintain organizational discipline, our party would have to adopt a strategic plan at the earliest point possible in the election cycle. Putting the strategic plan to a vote was essential to obtaining the buy-in from the 65 members of the “central committee,” the formal name of the county party organization.

Drafting a plan and then circulating it to the members in advance and asking for comment demonstrated that the new

leadership was listening. Good ideas can be incorporated based on feedback received, while bad ideas and distractions can be left out. None of the members of the Central Committee offered any input or changes to the plan, yet they all knew they were given the opportunity to do so.

The plan passed unanimously.

Once it did, its adoption provided a shield against every distracting idea that would

pop up subsequently. Members of the committee all had the best interest of the party at heart, but our members would create the conditions for failure if we implemented every idea and suggestion that came up in a meeting. The adoption of the strategic plan was critical to maintain discipline.

The key features of the Strategic Plan our party adopted in 2001, updated versions of which were adopted again in 2003, 2005, and 2007 were:

### **1. Clear Organizational Structure**

- Delineate specific roles and responsibilities for the party and its candidates, ensuring a focused and coordinated effort.

### **2. Volunteer and Donor Engagement**

- Emphasize identifying, recruiting, training, and rewarding volunteers - crucial for sustained grassroots support.
- Maintain and engage donors through structured programs like the Century Club, Reagan Club, and Chairman's Circle, which ensures a steady flow of financial resources.

### **3. Highly Focused Campaign Programs**

- Include targeted programs for voter registration, voter persuasion, and maximizing voter turnout, which ensures the critical aspects of campaigning are covered.
- Our Republican Neighborhood Precinct Organization is the primary campaign program, receiving the lion's share of resources. It is the mechanism for mobilizing Republican voters and

ensuring they received guidance on the party's endorsed candidates.

### **4. Comprehensive Training and Support**

- Encourage campaign training for candidates, staff, and volunteers, improving the overall effectiveness of campaign efforts.
- Integrate elected officials with party operations through the San Diego Association of Republican Elected Officials, which strengthens party unity and coherence.

### **5. Strategic Use of Resources**

- Emphasize sound management principles like accountability and specialization, maximizing the efficient use of resources.
- Clear division of labor between the party and candidates allows for focused efforts on both expanding the Republican base and winning over non-Republican voters.

### **6. Communication and Information Dissemination**

- Regular internal communication through newsletters and the Republican Political Report keeps members informed and engaged.
- Programs to inform members about endorsed candidates ensure that party supporters are well-informed and mobilized.

### **7. Flexibility and Adaptability**

- Acknowledge the necessity to adapt to a larger and more complex

organization, showing an understanding of the dynamic nature of political campaigns and the importance of continuous improvement.

- Specific provisions for monitoring, reporting, and assessing the efficacy of various task forces and programs enable responsive adjustments as necessary.

## 8. Strong Vision and Mission

- A clear vision of a county with low taxes, accountable government, and protected liberties resonates with core Republican values.
- The mission to elect candidates who will implement these principles

ensures a consistent and focused effort towards achieving the party's goals.

## 9. Focus on Election Integrity

- The Ballot Integrity Task Force addresses potential issues of voter fraud and ensures the integrity of the election process, which is critical for maintaining public trust and confidence.

## 10. Incentives for Participation

- Offering various benefits and incentives for volunteers, donors, and members of the San Diego Association of Republican Elected Officials encourages active participation and strengthens party loyalty.

# FIVE CORE FUNCTIONS

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**People think focus means saying yes to the thing you've got to focus on. But that's not what it means at all. It means saying no to the hundred other good ideas that there are. You have to pick carefully. I'm actually as proud of the things we haven't done as the things I have done. Innovation is saying no to 1,000 things.**

Steve Jobs, Apple Worldwide Developers' Conference, 1997.

My fellow leaders and I focused the Republican Party of San Diego County on performing five core functions for which the division of labor and specialization made the local party organization ideally suited:

- Voter registration to boost the number of party voters.

- Voter turnout programs to maximize participation of the party's membership in elections.
- Endorsements and nominations to provide Republican voters with guidance.

- Volunteer recruitment and mobilization to implement these programs.
- Fundraising to provide the necessary financial resources.

## 1. VOTER REGISTRATION

Party affiliation is the best predictor of voter behavior. When voters in a political party are informed of their party’s nominee or endorsed candidate, voters will overwhelmingly choose to support that candidate. As a result, the more members a party has in a district, the larger the reliable base vote will be.

The party prioritized voter registration through multiple programs, including but not limited to:

- Supporting Republican clubs registering new citizens to vote at swearing-in ceremonies.
- Participating in the state party’s “Operation Bounty” program which paid the party \$3 per new Republican registration generated through the program. Often, candidate campaigns would provide supplementing funding to increase the bounty on new Republican registrations in their districts.
- Appearances in local media encouraging voters to register to join the Republican Party.

In addition to these five priorities, I will describe five more programs and activities essential for a healthy and strong party organization.

- Encouraging party clubs and affiliate organizations to engage in voter registration activity.

Driving party membership is an important core party function. At times when the national party brand is strong, such as in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, registration activity helps the party to take advantage of the strong brand.

Concurrently, it is important to recognize party registration is a lagging indicator, and party identification is the leading indicator. That is, a voter who decides to identify with a party does not immediately complete a voter registration card to change parties, if ever. Because party brands are defined nationally, not locally, the long-term registration trends in a region will largely be driven by how well the national party brand is received in a community.

You should evaluate the effectiveness of your party voter registration activities in this context.

## 2. VOTER TURNOUT AND PERSUASION

The party’s single most extensive political program was, by far, the Republican Neighborhood Precinct Organization

– a network of party volunteers who were each assigned to drive party voter turnout in their own precincts.

The Precinct Organization serves multiple critical campaign functions:

- **Drives voter turnout.** Multiple studies demonstrate the impact of an in-person visit to be far higher than mail or telephone calls in maximizing the rate at which a voter participates in the election. A study by Alan Green and Donald Gerber in 2000 shows a 9.8% increase in turnout from an in-person visit, versus 0.6% increase for a phone call and no impact from mail.
- **Helps Republican voters support Republican candidates.** Precinct volunteers delivered a doorhanger to the Republican homes in their neighborhood which included the list of all the endorsed and nominated party candidates. Since party affiliation is not included for candidates on California ballots, the doorhanger may be the only reliable source of this information a voter receives.
- **Builds trust and confidence.** Personal canvassing allows volunteers to directly interact with voters, providing a human touch that can significantly increase trust in a candidate or party. This direct contact helps voters feel heard and valued, as opposed to the impersonal nature of phone calls or political mail. The effort involved in visiting voters at their homes demonstrates a higher level of commitment from the campaign. Voters perceive this as a sign that the candidate is genuinely interested in their concerns and is willing to invest time and resources to engage with them directly

The Republican Neighborhood Precinct Organization in San Diego was modeled after the structure of the Republican Party at the local level in New York, where members of the county committee are elected by precinct, with a Committeeman and Committeewoman elected for each. This structure of the county committee builds the precinct organization into the very structure of the committee.

In California, the county committee is elected differently, with just a handful of members per State Assembly or County Supervisorial District. Consequently, the precinct organization in San Diego had to be built using volunteers recruited and assigned to their precinct, rather than relying on the organization of the county committee itself.

The precinct organization's structure, and the specific duties assigned to the Precinct Representatives, reflect numerous advantages over the traditional candidate-driven voter turnout model:

- **Precinct Representatives were assigned to their home precinct.** This eliminated the hesitancy when volunteers are assigned to walk a precinct away from where they live, with which they are unfamiliar and have no personal connection. Precinct Representatives could start walking their precinct by walking out their front door.
- **Precinct Representatives focused on visiting their Republican neighbors, leveraging commonalities like neighborhood and party affiliation.** They were not tasked with visiting non-Republican voters, which was left to candidate campaigns. This focus on Republican turnout eased

recruitment efforts and allowed candidate campaigns to concentrate on mobilizing non-Republican voters.

- **Precinct Representatives attended a one-hour training session** to strengthen their party connection, learn door-to-door techniques, and understand the importance of their roles. This training highlighted the value of their work, ensuring they didn't feel it was just "busy work."
- **The organization was deployed into the field three times: four weeks before the election when vote by mail ballots were sent, the weekend before the election, and for poll watching on Election Day.** Poll watching involved surveying

the list of voters who had cast ballots on Election Day, then calling Republican voters who had not yet turned out that afternoon, with a goal of increasing turnout by a handful of votes per precinct on that day.

Changes to California's voting system since then would require the program to shift activity earlier, as more votes are now cast by mail and polling places have been replaced with larger, and fewer, voting centers.

The Republican Neighborhood Precinct Organization was formed in January 2002. By November of that year, 1,463 volunteers were recruited, trained, and deployed in the program. Two years later, in November of the presidential election year of 2004, more than 3,200 volunteers were in the program.

### 3. ENDORSEMENTS AND NOMINATIONS

While California law defines local offices as "non-partisan," that did not mean our party was under any such obligation. Rather, the party's strategic plan made clear every office, at every level, represented an opportunity to put Republican ideas into action.

Since the California electoral system did not provide a mechanism for party nominations for local offices via primaries, the county committee opted to endorse Republican candidates for each local office directly.

**Candidate Recruitment Task Force (CRTF).** Recognize the importance of fielding strong candidates for each office, including more obscure local district offices such as fire and water boards, the strategic plan created a Candidate Recruitment Task Force (CRTF) charged with identifying and recruiting strong,

qualified Republican candidates for all elective offices within the county.

The task force surveyed each elective office, cataloging which Republican incumbents plan to seek re-election and identifying positions where new candidates are necessary, recruiting from among volunteers, activists, donors, former candidates, and elected officials.

The CRTF chairman reports monthly to the Executive Committee on progress, planned activities, and resource needs, ensuring that the recruitment process is continually monitored and adjusted as necessary.

Significantly, the CRTF was crafted to be more of a magnet than a filter. The objective was primarily to ensure no office would go to the opposition due to no Republican filing at all. When multiple Republicans



expressed an interest in running for the office, the endorsement process would determine a nominee/endorsed candidate.

**Endorsement Process.** The Strategic Plan did not specify the process for considering endorsements, but stipulated the process for the primary election must be adopted by the preceding December, and by May of the election year for the general election.

These procedures included provisions for expedited consideration of endorsement requests from incumbent Republican elected officials seeking re-election.

Candidates were evaluated based on their alignment with Republican principles and their ability to effectively compete in their respective races. The committee ensured the candidates endorsed were those who most deserved official party support.

The communication of endorsements is achieved through the Republican Neighborhood Precinct Organization, where the doorhangers delivered serve as the main method of informing Republican voters about endorsed candidates.

This grassroots approach leverages personal connections within neighborhoods to disseminate endorsement information effectively. Additionally, slate cards produced by the Republican Party were mailed to Republican voters, and electronic communications through email newsletters and the party's website further reinforce the endorsement message.

The process a local committee uses for endorsements must be crafted carefully.

A poorly crafted process can cripple a party's ability to use its endorsement powers to elect

candidates. For example, a process can make it so easy for any one committee member with a grievance, real or imagined, to block an endorsement that very few endorsements are made, giving the advantage to the opposition.

Meanwhile, an endorsement process that is fully automatic provides no mechanism to incentivize elected officials to make every effort to implement Republican principles, and support fellow party members.

After careful consideration and discussion among candidates, elected officials, committee members, campaigners, and leaders, the party arrived at the following process for endorsing candidates.

- Elected officials seeking re-election to the same office could request the party endorsement well in advance. This served to focus attention on winning additional seats, rather than on endless crusades to further purify the party.
- When only one Republican sought an office, following the close of filing, the party chairman could grant the endorsement on the party's behalf. The endorsement was not automatic, ensuring some level of vetting before an endorsement was granted. If the chairman declined to provide the endorsement, it could still be granted by a majority vote of the full committee.
- When more than one Republican would appear on the general election ballot, granting the endorsement required a 2/3rds vote of the full committee. This threshold ensured the endorsement was only granted when a supermajority level of support existed. A lower threshold would create more situations where volunteers refused to participate in



party turnout programs because the party was supporting candidates they did not support.

The party would never endorse more Republicans for an office than there were seats up in the election. For example, the party would never endorse three candidates for two school board seats.

In practice, incumbents seeking re-election were endorsed in almost all cases. The only action an incumbent could take that would seriously jeopardize an endorsement for re-election was to support a non-Republican over an endorsed Republican candidate for some other

office. Support for tax increases would similarly jeopardize an endorsement.

The endorsement process served as a constructive tool for maintaining party discipline by signaling to incumbents that certain actions were disapproved of. However, if the process was overly strict and resulted in few endorsements, the party's influence would diminish. This could lead to more candidates seeking support elsewhere, weakening the party's ability to enforce discipline and maintain unity.

No endorsement process is perfect – it is inherently a compromise. The goal should be to find the balance which maximizes the party's ability to elect the most party members to office.

## 4. VOLUNTEERS



**Thanks to your energy and talent, you've often been called the foot soldiers of our party. But that description is becoming outdated. You've got a good share of generals in your ranks—and that share is growing.**

Ronald Reagan in 1983

Republican campaigns are heavily dependent on volunteers to carry out many of the campaign programs essential to success. While candidates of the left can often rely on labor unions and left wing groups for the activists who will engage in grassroots campaigning, Republicans are dependent on volunteers.

Three concepts are central to building a strong volunteer organization: purpose, trust, and culture.

- **PURPOSE.** Volunteers choose to dedicate their time to a cause. Time is valuable, and so the cause must be worthwhile. Volunteers must feel a sense of purpose, that their time is going to a cause they believe in, and is worth the sacrifice.
- **TRUST.** Leaders must earn the trust of volunteers, demonstrating their effort will not be wasted on frivolous pursuits, or in support of unworthy candidates. Easily lost, trust must be continually earned.

- **CULTURE.** Every organization takes on a culture which informs those in the organization how to behave when there is no explicit rule. A party's culture must be attractive and participation in the party must provide a positive, rewarding experience.

Under California law at the time, the local party was required to meet ten times per year. Faced with this requirement, we sought to use the party meeting as an opportunity to draw, inspire, inform, and reward volunteers.

This required a fundamental overhaul of how the party held its regular meetings.

Prior to July 2001, the monthly meeting of the Republican Party of San Diego County was held in the San Diego County Administration Center – because it was free.

Meetings were tortuous. The officers would sit in the seats normally used by County Supervisors during meetings, and members of the committee would sit way in the back in tiny uncomfortable chairs. Most meetings descended into adversarial confrontations. Only those legally obligated to be there would attend. Some would make the most of the meetings – by bringing their mail to sift through.

Following my election on July 9, I announced the committee would no longer meet at the county building. Party leadership took the month of August to restructure and reformat the meeting.

On Monday, September 10, 2001, the Republican Party of San Diego County reconvened at its new meeting site – the Manchester Grand Hyatt hotel in downtown San Diego, owned by Republican donor Doug

Manchester, whose team gave the party a reasonable rate for meeting facilities.

The meeting format was revised to focus on providing attendees with value in the form of the opportunity to network with fellow party members, and to learn and draw inspiration from the presentations.

- Most in depth party business was moved to a monthly executive committee meeting which would be held one week before the full party meeting. All committee members were welcome to sit in on executive committee meetings, which allowed for more in-depth discussion of party business. This freed up time during the full committee meeting to keep things moving.
- Each full committee meeting would feature a main speaker. Grover Norquist, President of Americans for Tax Reform, was our first featured speaker.
- Party donors were invited to come into the meeting room 30 minutes early to visit with that month's featured speakers. Donors also received special nametags recognizing their support of the party if they joined a donor club. The meeting therefore served both a donor stewardship function in addition to a volunteer one.
- Every Republican donor and contact in the party's database were invited to attend. Since email had not yet been widely adopted, more than 5,000 postcards were sent out each month.
- Each Republican elected official in attendance was introduced.

- Volunteers were recognized at each meeting.
- Meetings were kept to no more than 90 minutes, with an emphasis on keeping things moving and not allowing the meeting to become bogged down.
- If votes were required of the full committee, such as when considering endorsements, the committee would take a short recess to allow non-committeemembers to make their way home, and the full committee reconvened to handle any necessary business.

The new meeting format worked: instead of drawing 65 or fewer committmembers to a bad monthly experience, more than 200 Republicans attended a monthly positive one. Most meetings drew more than 200 people, and some more than 300.

## 5. FUNDRAISING

Donor confidence had been shattered, and the Republican Party was in persistent debt by summer 2001. The situation was so desperate that executive committee members had to put money into a hat at one meeting to help the party pay the rent in its dilapidated Kearny Mesa headquarters.

After my election and the adoption of our strategic plan, my leadership team and I called 77 party donors who had each contributed at least \$1,000 in the past. None would give. It was the bottom of the election cycle for fundraising, and many donors, especially those making larger gifts, had given up.

Meetings also became much more constructive. The renewed sense of purpose, stronger attendance, and opportunities for committeemembers to have their voices heard without having to resort to resolutions or bad behavior all combined to create a much better experience for everyone.

Monthly meetings turned into an opportunity to inform, motivate and recruit volunteers into the party's campaign programs. Volunteers who made extraordinary contributions received special recognition, further motivating them while demonstrating to the wider audience the party valued its volunteers.

The most dramatic, and unexpected, change was in the culture of the organization. Channeling party efforts into meaningful campaign programs as an alternative to monthly excommunication rituals proved a powerful tool in transforming the party and attracting the volunteers necessary for ambitious programs.

Fortunately, I had learned about political fundraising at several Leadership Institute programs I attended in my 20's, and had begun lecturing for the Leadership Institute at various campaign schools. This training provided a clear roadmap of what to do.

Recognizing that donors of different giving abilities tend to give for different reasons, I recognized that the major donors, many of whom contribute out of an expectation they will have direct access to those in decision-making positions, would eventually come back. But not now.

# DIRECT MAIL FUNDRAISING IS KEY

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Our team turned to the small donors – those who contribute out of a passion for a cause – and we reached them through direct mail solicitation.

I had learned about direct mail fundraising from the Leadership Institute, and knew exactly how to write a direct mail fundraising letter, the types of envelopes to use, the reply device – everything that goes in an effective direct mail package.

My leadership team recovered a database of roughly 5,000 past party supporters, several boxes of unused letterhead, and a functioning laser printer.

The first direct mail appeal went out a few days later, carrying a four-page letter written in the highly effective style learned at the Leadership Institute. It conveyed a powerful

message about our goal to build a world class Republican Party in San Diego so we could put Republican ideas into action.

Donors were asked to contribute to our cause and join a donor club. The San Diego County Republican Party established three annual giving levels: Century Club \$100, Reagan Club \$250, Chairman’s Circle \$1,000.

Within a few days, dozens of contributions started arriving back at party headquarters. The first mail appeal raised a net of more than \$10,000, allowing the party to keep the rent paid and acquire additional equipment to strengthen our operations.

Within a few months the party’s debts were paid off, cash flow became regular and stable, and we never looked back.

# THE DONOR PYRAMID

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My leadership team and I recognized the importance of a fundraising program which appealed to donors of every giving ability, understanding donors gave for different reasons.

- Small dollar donors were reached primarily through a robust direct mail program which involved multiple solicitations per year, with a stepped-up schedule at the end of the year, and at election time. This program was essential to funding regular party operations, building our donor clubs, and identifying new donors.

- Social donors capable of making generally larger gifts than those giving strictly from mail appeals were reached through donor clubs, which provided regular stewardship events. Social donors will contribute, but they want to go to an event. For them, political giving is like expensive dating – they expect to go to an event, to socialize, perhaps have their picture taken. The Century Club, Reagan Club, and Chairman’s Circle were designed for these donors.

- Major donors capable of making the largest gifts were reached through personal solicitation and more intimate events which included Republican elected officials, candidates, and other VIPs.
- The annual Lincoln-Reagan Dinner was first held in February 2002 to bring the entire donor community together for a major event. This event has grown each year and in later years drew more than 1,000 party supporters and raised more than \$500,000.

## FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND YEAR-END RESERVE

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A political party differs from candidate campaigns in one main way: the party is an ongoing entity, while candidate campaigns fold up the tent after the election, win or lose. To this end, the party could not spend its accounts down to zero for the election. Doing so would, and prior to 2001 often did, lead the party to take on debt in the six months of the next election cycle.

To avoid this, the San Diego County Republican Party established a policy to end each election cycle with no debt, no accounts payable, and at least \$100,000 in cash on hand to ensure the party could continue to operate into the new election cycle.

By beginning and ending each year with this reserve, after the first year the party could accurately state

that all funds raised in the cycle would be spent in the cycle.

Many state and local political parties find themselves in debt. How can this happen so often in a party which preaches “fiscal responsibility?” The answer can be found in the reality that almost all pressure within a political party or campaign is to spend. Saying yes to everything, and no to nothing, guarantees spending more than one takes in.

In practice, while everyone in a political party is asking for funding, someone has to say “no” to many requests, some from very influential candidates and elected officials, to maintain priorities. That person must be the party chairman, and the committee must support the chairman in such decision making in order to avoid sinking into inevitable debt.

# GROWTH AND AVOIDING THE DANGER OF “SMALL ORGANIZATION DISEASE”

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**Without continual growth and progress, such words as improvement, achievement, and success have no meaning.**

Benjamin Franklin

In volunteer politics, small organizations tend to be about small things, while big organizations tend to focus on big things.

Small volunteer organizations often fall into focusing on trivial matters like titles, seating arrangements, and lengthy debates over minor issues. This can deter talented individuals from returning, as they prefer to contribute to organizations that focus on significant, impactful work.

Larger organizations remain larger by exhibiting more discipline, concentrating on substantial themes and objectives. Their broader purpose attracts and retains individuals who have other options. By maintaining this focus, large organizations remain effective and avoid shrinking into irrelevance.

The growth of the Republican Party of San Diego County, from engaging dozens to thousands of people each month, both resulted from and contributed to its positive culture. Focusing on winning steps and community impact created a virtuous cycle. Increased

participation improved internal discipline, reinforcing the elements that attracted more members.

A larger, well-organized party gains more credibility and influence in public policy. This legitimacy attracts more volunteers, donors, and endorsements, fueling further growth and success.

As organizations grow, they attract individuals with broader skills and expertise, leading to more innovation and capacity. Growth also fosters resilience. A larger donor and volunteer base helps withstand internal and external challenges, such as post-election lulls or opposition gains. This broader support base allows the organization to absorb shocks and continue functioning effectively.

Conservative volunteers are more likely to stay committed to a growing and successful organization. The bandwagon effect is powerful; seeing tangible results and being part of a larger movement is motivating, leading to higher retention rates, and a bigger army for the next battle.

# THE NEED TO KEEP MOVING FORWARD: AVOIDING ORGANIZATIONAL STAGNATION

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In volunteer politics, standing still is not an option. The moment an organization is perceived as inactive, it begins to decline. Much like nature recycles dead material, society tends to recycle stagnant organizations. Maintaining momentum is crucial to prevent this decay.

There is no such thing as off time or down time in a successful political organization. Consistent and regular communication with donors, volunteers, activists, and other stakeholders is essential. If the party ceases to engage regularly, the perception of idleness or, worse, a dying organization, can quickly spread.

## CONSTANT COMMUNICATION IS KEY

During my Chairmanship, I made it a priority to ensure that every stakeholder received frequent updates on the party's progress and opportunities for involvement multiple times each month. This consistent engagement kept our base energized and informed. Our communication strategies included:

- **Invitations to Monthly Meetings:** Regular invitations to the Republican Party meetings ensured that stakeholders remained connected and involved in ongoing discussions and decisions.
- **Insider's Report:** This personalized memo to party donors and key

volunteers provided an insider perspective on recent developments and opportunities, fostering a sense of inclusion and transparency.

- **Weekly Newsletters:** The Republican Political Report was a weekly newsletter that kept everyone updated on the latest political happenings and campaign progress.
- **Chairman's Report Emails:** These emails documented what I, as Chairman, had been working on and outlined upcoming events and initiatives, ensuring that stakeholders were always in the loop.

## MAXIMIZING MEDIA PRESENCE

In addition to direct communications, our team took every opportunity to appear in local media, including television and newspaper articles. Favorable coverage was then disseminated to party

stakeholders, further validating our efforts and boosting morale. This media presence was crucial for maintaining a high profile and demonstrating the party's ongoing activities and successes.



## CONTINUOUS ENGAGEMENT

By maintaining a constant flow of information and opportunities for involvement, the party avoided the pitfalls of organizational stagnation. This approach not only kept our base engaged but also demonstrated our

commitment to ongoing progress and action. The perception of a dynamic and active organization is vital for sustaining volunteer enthusiasm and donor confidence, ensuring the long-term health and effectiveness of the party.

## “RESOLVING” TO AVOID DISTRACTIONS

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**Congress is so strange; a man gets up to speak and says nothing, nobody listens, and then everybody disagrees.**

Will Rogers

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**The most common error of a smart engineer is to optimize a thing which should not exist.**

Elon Musk

When the role of a local party organization is not well defined as that of a campaign organization, people will find other trouble to get themselves into. The most common form of this trouble comes in the form of a resolution, or a statement adopted by the committee.

While in theory resolutions are merely an expression of the organization, in practice they are almost always destructive, as they become the preferred form for the party to attack its own members.

Resolutions have their own laws of physics, so to speak:

- Nobody cares about resolutions attacking the opposition. They're the opposition, we're supposed to attack them.
- The only newsworthy resolutions are those of the party attacking itself.

- Consideration of resolutions teaches members of the committee that they too can get attention if they introduce their own resolution attacking some other Republican.
- Very quickly, the culture within the party becomes poisonous.

It is relatively easy for any organization to attract people whose time is worth nothing. Yet an organization dominated by people with nothing else to do is not likely to be effective.

Attracting people who have other places to be, whose time is in demand, is far harder – and those individuals are not likely to look to sit through long meetings of the party debating who to throw out this month.

As Chairman, I made clear I would strongly discourage the committee from considering, much less adopting, any resolutions

during my chairmanship. In six years, not one resolution was even introduced. The members understood that if passing resolutions had any relationship to victory, the party wouldn't be in the hole it was in, and it was time to start winning again.

This does not mean the legitimate concerns of members of the committee would be ignored. Rather than trying to

do everything by resolution, the county party used the occasional phone call, or letter, or denial of an endorsement to move the ball forward while avoiding the toxic climate created by resolutions.

For commendations or recognition of accomplishments by volunteers, candidates and elected officials, the county party would issue awards instead of resolutions.

## TEN SIGNS OF A STRONG LOCAL PARTY ORGANIZATION

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### 1. A CLEAR POINT OF ENTRY, AND A LADDER OF ENGAGEMENT.

Invisible political parties have a hard time attracting new volunteers, activists and leaders. One unanticipated key to our success in San Diego was our regular, high-value monthly meeting. The original retooling of our monthly meeting was initiated for the purpose of making the meeting less painful and more productive. Yet, over time the meeting became a clear point of entry for conservatives who decided to get involved with the party, or at least learn what it is about.

Local party organizations need to be found. Regular, well-publicized events which offer value to those attending provide an essential entry point for new people – essential for growth. Once involved, the party must offer ways for the newly initiated to deepen their involvement. A “ladder of engagement” provides rewarding opportunities for activists to get more involved, and increase their contributions to the campaign – in time, talent, and/or money. Providing an incentive structure rewarding those who contribute more to the campaign is essential to drawing the resources to wage effective programs.

### 2. A WELCOMING CULTURE.

The quality of an experience the first time a volunteer or activist attends a party or candidate event will very often determine whether they come back. Was it a rewarding experience, or a dreadful one not to be repeated?

Healthy party organizations and campaigns have a welcoming culture. New people are greeted and welcomed, introduced to others, and form friendships. A poisonous culture, one typified by rapid ideological inquires and questions aimed at gauging levels

of loyalty and purity impede growth through a hostile environment. If an interested person shows up at a party or campaign event, chances are he or she

is sufficiently interested and supportive to take the time to attend. A welcoming culture provides incentives for new people to stay and contribute to the mission.

### **3. STRONG MEETINGS – REGULAR, VIABLE AND HEALTHY.**

Highly dysfunctional meetings that provide little value tend to attract those whose time is worth nothing, while driving away those who have better places to be. Meetings should be regular,

positive, provide useful information and networking opportunities, and offer recognition to those who have made recent, important contributions to the party’s programs and initiatives.

### **4. GROWING.**

**“...a city that is accustomed to freedom and independence is either growing or declining; there is no middle state.**

Niccolo Machiavelli

What Machiavelli said of “a city that is accustomed to freedom and independence” can also be said of a party – it is either growing, or declining. There is no middle.

While there are natural trends within election cycles that often see a decline in volunteer and donor participation in

the months immediately following an election, healthy party organizations commonly experience growth over time. The reasons which make a party organization healthy – purpose, focus, a positive experience, conducting valuable initiatives contributing to achieving the mission – also make it attractive to new people while retaining those currently involved. Party organizations that shrink over multiple election cycles can often find the source of their decline in the failure to maintain a healthy, attractive experience for those involved.

### **5. FINANCIALLY SOUND.**

**“You can’t save the world if you can’t pay the rent.**

Morton Blackwell

Financial stability is critical to achieving goals and effecting change. When party organizations experience financial distress, it becomes all-consuming. As word of such distress spreads, donors and activists lose

confidence in the organization, and often take a step back to “see what happens.” This is a reverse bandwagon effect, where instead of people getting on board with a successful candidate or organization, people abandon one that is seen as failing.

Local party committees should never – under any circumstance – be led into a

liquidity crisis, a condition when short term obligations like payroll and bills exceed cash on hand. Long term debt, such as payments

on the purchase of a party headquarters, is not an issue so long as it does not contribute to a liquidity problem at any point.

## **6. REGULAR INCOME FROM EVERY LEVEL OF THE DONOR PYRAMID.**

Political parties dependent on one group of donors, such as only small dollar donors, or only a handful of major donors, tend to become financially unstable over time. The permanence of party organizations gives them a fundraising advantage over candidate campaigns in one key area – party committees exist over extended periods of time,

providing the opportunity to develop long term relationships with donors. A healthy fundraising operation raises funds from small dollar contributors, often through direct mail and online, social donors, often through events, and major donors, typically through personal solicitations. A diverse donor base provides greater financial stability.

## **7. PHYSICAL PRESENCE IN THE NEIGHBORHOODS.**

Local political parties which only exist online may as well not exist. Strong party organizations are physically present, such as in the form of party headquarters, a volunteer structure which reaches into neighborhoods, at community events such

as festivals and on Main Street on weekends. A physically present party builds more trust with voters, generates opportunities to recruit new activists, and conveys credibility in ways which simply cannot be matched by a purely digital presence.

## **8. RECRUITS, TRAINS, AND PREPARES VOLUNTEERS IN A STRUCTURE.**

A political party's longevity provides not only fundraising advantages, but volunteer advantages as well. Building programs and volunteer structures within a party, such as a neighborhood precinct operation, a dedicated events team, or a group of volunteers to table at public events,

allows volunteers to develop a specialty, improve their skills in specific areas of interest, and develop expertise. Volunteer structures also create opportunities for volunteer training and recognition, in turn supporting retention and recruitment.

## **9. FIELDS AND PREPARES CANDIDATES FOR EVERY OFFICE.**

### **“ Well prepared people have better luck.**

James H, Austin, professor emeritus of neurology, University of Colorado

Strong party organizations lean into their role by promoting the training of candidates, campaigners, and activists to provide them with the political technology skills to succeed in the arena. Every office for which

a conservative candidate is not fielded, or where a candidate lacks skills which could have been taught, or is served by unprepared staff and volunteers is a concession to the

other team. Every office represents an opportunity to put conservative ideas into action, and is deserving of a quality campaign supported by well-trained campaigners.

## 10. DEVELOPS, ADOPTS AND EXECUTES A PLAN.

“**Plan for what is difficult while it is easy, do what is great while it is small.**

Sun Tzu

“**A goal without a plan is just a wish.**

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

“**In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.**

Dwight D. Eisenhower

The Republican Party of San Diego County benefitted enormously from the adoption of a strategic plan, as well as from using

the right planning process. The plan did not begin with a poll or a survey. Rather, solid application of political technology – the skills and tools to organize and communicate – formed our plan’s foundation.

Once a clear direction was set, drafts were circulated and responses solicited from those whose support, or at least consent, would be essential. This element of the planning process was crucial to obtaining buy-in, allowing stakeholders to have their voices heard before final decisions were made. After adoption, the plan provided clear direction, maintained the flexibility to adapt to changing conditions, and provided a shield against rash, ill-conceived proposals later in the cycle.

## THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE

“

**The future doesn’t belong to the fainthearted; it belongs to the brave.**

Ronald Reagan, Address to the Nation, January 28, 1986.

The success of the Republican Party of San Diego County is the result of sound principles and political technology implemented by a team committed to the vision of building a world class organization.

“

**Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.**

Theodore Roosevelt

First, defining the party’s role was essential. The party focused on its core responsibilities: increasing membership through voter registration, mobilizing members to vote, and maximizing the number of members voting for party candidates. This clear

division of labor allowed candidate campaigns to focus on non-Republican voters necessary for victory, ensuring a strategic use of resources and time.

Second, the adoption of a strategic plan early in each election cycle was crucial. The plan delineated specific roles and responsibilities, provided a roadmap for engaging volunteers and donors, and established tightly focused and achievable campaign programs. The plan's unanimous adoption by the local committee ensured organizational discipline and provided a shield against distractions, enabling the party to stay focused on its core functions.

Third, volunteer engagement was a cornerstone of the party's transformation. Volunteers were recruited, trained, and given meaningful roles, particularly through the Republican Neighborhood Precinct Organization. This grassroots approach not only increased voter turnout but also built trust and demonstrated the party's commitment to its members.

Fourth, a well-crafted endorsements process maintained party discipline and unity. By signaling disapproval of certain actions through the endorsement process, the party incentivized good behavior and aligned with core Republican principles without making the perfect the enemy of the good.

Finally, robust fundraising efforts were implemented, focusing on small-dollar donors through direct mail, social donors through donor clubs, and major donors through personal solicitations and major events like the annual Lincoln-Reagan Dinner. Financial management principles ensured that the party maintained a reserve to avoid debt and ensure continuous and stable operation.

These strategies, combined with sound leadership and a clear vision, transformed the Republican Party of San Diego County into a highly effective and powerful organization capable of electing conservative candidates and implementing Republican ideas.









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“  
*You owe it to your  
philosophy to study  
how to win.*

- Morton Blackwell

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