

The American Legion

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For God and Country

10/3

March 21, 1997
90-106-90

David L. Gough
299 Spring Street
Darlington, WI 53530-1613

Dear Commander Gough,

Your letter concerning Legion membership was forwarded to the membership division for a response.

Your letter shows you are very perceptive and you hit several "membership nails" right on the head:

1. "lack of interest or burnout" - A lot of members feel they've done their work over the years and now it's time for someone else to take over. That may be true, but have those older members trained anybody to take over, or are they just throwing the reins down? Each Post should have a "mentoring program" where the older members share their knowledge and experiences with the younger members who are being handed those reins.
2. "Vietnam veterans are hard to sign up" - Many Vietnam vets (especially the in-country ones) are still bitter about being drafted into an unpopular war, but it's not nearly as bad as it was 10 or 15 years ago. You, being a Vietnam era vet, should be able to identify or empathize with the unique circumstances of the Vietnam veteran. We're finding most Posts have the most difficulty in recruiting the Panama and Desert Storm veterans, because of the greater age difference. A 60-year old vet's idea of what constitutes a "good" Post, is usually a lot different than a twenty-something's idea, and this difference is what makes the recruiting of young veterans so difficult. The question is: "How do we make our Posts attractive to both the young and the older veterans?" And the answer is not a simple one. We have to learn what the younger vets expect and want in a Legion Post, and then determine if we can deliver. It will definitely take some time and effort, and probably more than a little negotiating on both sides.

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3. "all it takes is personal contact" - Personal contact made this organization what it is today and can take the Legion to new heights in membership, but unfortunately personal contact takes the most time and that's what a lot of our members don't want to give up. We're competing with many things (TV, Internet, other organizations, family, sports, church, etc.) for members' and potential members' time. It's tough to persuade him or her that spending personal time doing Legion work can be very rewarding.

4. "all you have to do is ask; sometimes it may take the right someone to ask" - This is the **BIG SECRET** in membership. Many Legionnaires still wait for veterans to come up to them and ask to join the Legion. I've worked many membership booths with different groups of people. I've seen two people work under the same circumstances when one of them would sign up 25 new members and the other person would sign up 2 or fewer during the same period of time. The first person would aggressively ask many people to join, while the second person would sit back and wait for someone to ask him about the Legion.

5. "the problem appears to be apathy" - Yes, apathy rears its ugly head among the many members who never, or rarely, bother to attend meetings, but I believe there's another problem that is often overlooked - and that's the lack of "hands on" experience. We've spent many dollars and much time telling our members how to be successful recruiters. We teach classes at our National Membership Workshop, at the Regional Leadership Workshops, at Department Leadership Colleges, at Mid-Winter Conferences and at just about every other place more than 15 Legionnaires gather. I think it's important to educate our members in some of the proper and more successful recruiting techniques, just as it's important to teach one the fundamentals and proper techniques of successful sky-diving before a jump. BUT, until that person steps out of that plane door, or faces that potential member and asks him or her to join the Legion, they're neither a sky-diver nor a recruiter. I believe many of our members are afraid of rejection; afraid someone (or everyone) will say "No, I won't join The American Legion." We need to continue our recruiting education with actual hands-on training. We need to take that potential recruiter out on the street and stop a few passers-by and ask them to join the Legion. When that Legionnaire actually experiences the bitter taste of rejection (and realizes it's not fatal) and then enjoys the sweet taste of success (and realizes it far outweighs the temporary failures), he or she will be a full-fledged membership recruiter.

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I know I haven't answered all your questions, or solved any of the membership problems we're all experiencing, but I hope you'll be able to pick some small piece of wisdom out of the above spiel. Thank you for your service and dedication to The American Legion. It's suggestions and insights from members like you that help keep this such a great organization.

Sincerely,

Thomas C. Harris
THOMAS C. HARRIS
Assistant Director
Internal Affairs & Membership

- c: Dale M. Peterson, Commander, Department of Wisconsin
- Rick Barnett, Adjutant, Department of Wisconsin
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