Revitalizing Membership Participation in Local VFW Posts

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At the national level, Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) has experienced a sharp decline in membership over the last 30 years (Novelly, 2022). The decline exists throughout most locations with few exceptions. The VFW has been in communities for over 100 years, specifically in the Hawk Point community since 1961 (Nonprofitfacts.com, 2024). Declining membership can cause post closures and strain local community resources for needy military veterans.

Problem Identification and Investigation

The VFW is a generational veteran organization facing historic declines in membership. Its dual purpose is to offer solutions to existing members while growing new members. Resources, systems, and culture require research to deliver the organization's best practice outcome. On a broader scale, the systems or outcomes explored can assist many struggling Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) and volunteer organizations that assist communities throughout the United States.

Presenting the Problem

Membership loss at the national VFW has gone from 2.165 million in 1992 to 1 million members in 2018, or over 54% decline (Novelly, 2022). Compounding this trend is a corresponding and continual decline in the eligible veteran population from 21,171,000 in 1998 to 15,743,000 in 2018 (Vespa, 2020). As the rate of participation in VSOs declines, the opportunity for veterans to find trusted sources of information and resources for mental health and comradery declines. Efforts to reverse the decline from national leadership have not been effective and have often left veterans discouraged who have tried to connect. Turning the trend of VFW participation is critical for various reasons: improved mental and physical health, community resource relief, and maintaining a space that supports camaraderie among veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022).

The specific problem is that Local Post 7560 membership has declined by 30%–50%; the exact amount is undeterminable due to inadequate record-keeping. While Local Post 7560 has made efforts to increase and sustain membership, their efforts have been unsuccessful, such as leaning on bar revenues, causing a perception that the bar is the organization's backbone (Novelly, 2022). The post desires a solution for the benefit of veterans in Hawk Point, MO, specifically to provide them with a place of belonging. In addition, the post would like to expand the network whereby veterans are directed to care and other support services. What can be learned from solving the problem at the Post will likely benefit national leadership to dispense solutions across its network.

This study's aim was to assist local VFW Post 7560's Commander Hamilton and national Commander Borlin with retaining current members while working to attract new members. The overarching question on which the research focused was the following:

What actions can VFW Post 7560 take to reverse the declining trend in membership and active participation of all eligible veterans and sustain growth for the next decade?

Exploring the Solutions

A comprehensive literature review addressed seven guiding research questions to explore potential solutions. Topics included root causes and how best to inform short and long-term decision-making. A critical theme intertwined and explored was generational issues addressed through exploring the stage of life. The most critical finding was that large-scale language models (LLMs) allow a time-constrained and resource-constrained research project to conduct structured interviews and provide thorough qualitative analysis.

Heath and Heath's (2013) book, *Decisive: How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work,* addresses the issue of avoiding the pitfalls of narrow framing, a problem noted in academic, business, and veteran mental health programs. The core is the WRAP process: widen your options, reality-test your assumptions, attain distance before deciding, and prepare to be wrong (Heath & Heath, 2013).

There are generational aspects, but it is easier to find differences through the stage of life a person is in (Chambré, 2020; Joshi et al., 2011). Generations share more in common than differences, although perceptions of generational differences can lead to tensions in multigenerational environments (Joshi et al., 2011).

Large-scale language models, such as ChatGPT, provide researchers with the ability to enhance data analytics while efficiently using resources (Bullas, 2023; Dengel et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). Introducing a human element to support LLM increases the effectiveness and is a common practice of qualitative research (Caulfield, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). Zhang et al. (2023) concluded that caution is necessary, and LLM is better used to augment research and not as a standalone tool. It is critical to review findings to ensure they align with the researcher's perspective..

Multiple Perspectives & Test Solutions

The planned inquiry focused on multiple perspectives from four different types of analysis: ChatGPT 3.5 as a tool, NOISE (needs, opportunities, improvements, strengths, and exceptions), Bolman and Deal's (2017) four-frame, and the McKinsey 7S model (Athuraliya, 2023). As an embedded community member, the researcher contributed an ethnographic point of view (Caulfield, 2020). The study used an innovative approach to data analysis by incorporating ChatGPT as an LLM analysis tool for identifying themes, summarizing content, and drawing recommendations from structured interviews (Dengel et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023).

The researcher's synthesis of the findings aligned with Chat GPT's text analysis. However, two distinct themes emerged, differentiating the researcher's approach from ChatGPT's summarization:

- Having navigated the emotional landscape of 15 interviews, the researcher identified non-verbal cues, including emotions and vocal tones, that ChatGPT could not identify. These nuances allowed the researcher to highlight quotes and stories that best interpreted the themes and brought them to life.
- ChatGPT Identified and emphasized specific themes, such as camaraderie (an attribute the VFW excels in promoting). This positive aspect, while not a primary focus for the researcher, was highlighted by ChatGPT in its summarization.

The analysis points to the veterans' varied individual needs. The findings do not support the idea of a one-size-fits-all model being the solution. An aligned theme from the Veterans for VSO is that they need to provide purpose-driven activities, promote camaraderie that includes the veteran's support system, and be a place to assist with mental and physical health issues. The following descriptions are a synthesis of 15

interviews that provided a finite description of what these veterans need that VSOs should offer. Veterans enjoy activities where they can control the environment and express themselves and their passions. These passions include their desire to help others, their competitive nature, and individual hobbies that can be inclusive of groups. An example of the latter is coin collecting. A member engages in the hobby through research, while there are also trade shows to gather collectively, assist others, or show off one's bounty. The respondents indicated a need for VSOs to provide multiple engagement options.

An unanticipated takeaway from the interviews was the extent of participants' emotion, passion, and willingness to share beyond the questions posed. The ten questions were designed to identify the current needs of veterans. On several occasions, there were moments of pause in the interviews as veterans collected themselves from sharing an emotionally-driven experience. These stories ranged from their time in combat to mistreatment by other veterans within VSOs. The age or sex of the veteran did not discriminate on who received the mistreatment. Treatment of veterans is a particular area of concern for congressionally chartered VSOs. The data showed that the participation rate in VSOs is low; however, for some, the mistreatment occurred when they were prospective members, which is why they never joined.

After a comprehensive and holistic review, the following solutions were selected for Post 7560 because they best fit the current and future needs of veterans and answer the driving research question:

National and local posts need to look at generational differences and stage of life of veterans to understand needs better. A veteran's stage of life will also determine the extent of the support of the membership network. Additionally, Post 7560 needs to craft a long-term plan for the bar to be member-only.

Change Management Plan
The change management plan provides a roadmap for Post 7560 to implement the approved solution and to increase local enrollment by approximately 36 members, for a total of 86 members by 2030. Using a multi-frame perspective, Kotter's eight steps (Athuraliya, 2023) and Bolman and Deals' (2017) four frame model were integrated in the plan. The ability to properly evaluate and measure change, reinforce wins, and conduct scenario planning were incorporated in the plan as well for Post 7560 to manage the change effectively. A communication plan was also created to involve leadership, membership, and external VSOs. Finally, the detailed action plan will guide the site through the needed change within one year, which will be sustainable through 2030.

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