

# Growth

By Michael Hechter

*Once upon a time... your organization was created by an inspired group of like-minded Ultimate players. Everyone excitedly congregated around the shared purpose of playing Ultimate and worked to develop a league or tournament together. After the initial start-up, your group may have started to formalize its operations as an organization; as a result, the maturation process has begun. Now what?*

*Growth is a multifaceted issue confronting local and regional Ultimate organizations that requires understanding. This section will provide you with a comprehension of assessing growth and the benefits and challenges in growth, so you can properly control growth within your organization.*

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## Life Stages of an Organization

Non-profit organizations experience life stages—from birth to old age—similar to people. If your local Ultimate organization has already been created, then your organizational life has begun; though unlike humans who move progressively through maturation, the growth of an organization is not predictable. It's important to recognize the various stages most non-profits experience so you can regard them as "typical" transitions with both benefits and challenges. The more planning done with these stages in mind, the easier it is to control growth.

Striving for growth is a requirement for maintaining your organization. Because members will stop playing Ultimate for one reason or another (injury,

parenthood, move, etc.), you must continually strive for growth. That way, at least, you can remain where you are. Internally, growth management does require additional work, but when you don't strive for growth, you begin a downward spiral to the Stagnation stage.

As you read through the stages, determine your stage of development. Be aware that your organization may exist concurrently in different stages with various offerings. Consider five aspects of your group's management and operations:

1. Program and services – all your provided offerings
2. Board of directors – the designated leadership team
3. Volunteer pool – those willing to help with the work
4. Financial resources – include all revenue streams
5. Internal systems – policies and procedures.

## Startup (time to begin)

Organizations usually are created by an inspired group of people or by a motivated individual. During this stage, people congregate around a shared purpose and work to develop a program together. The entire focus of the group is the mission that first brought people together. There is a social aspect to the work; tasks are simple, and results are tangible.

Startup	Normal Challenges	Normal Benefits
<b>Program and services</b>	Properly demonstrating value to participants	Seeing the eagerness of participants
<b>Board of directors</b>	Over reliance on original founders to lead	Leading with a purpose
<b>Volunteers</b>	Keeping energy focused on the organization's work	Having fun and being energetic
<b>Finances</b>	Still being determined	Still being determined
<b>Internal systems</b>	Harnessing who's doing what	Being free to do what you want

## Infant (time to learn)

Everyone is busy, and activity takes precedence over results. Everything seems to be a priority, and everyone is spread thin. Many people are involved in the work, but coordination is little or non-existent. New ideas, like incorporation and tax exemption, start with enthusiasm. Rules begin to make their way in the culture of the organization.

Infant	Normal Challenges	Benefits
<b>Program and services</b>	Continuing after first year	Still new to participants
<b>Board of directors</b>	Founder(s) don't relinquish control	New leaders introduced
<b>Volunteers</b>	Controlling volunteer depth	Current volunteers are dedicated
<b>Finances</b>	Cash flow management	Cash flow
<b>Internal systems</b>	Learning by doing	Starting to form

## Adolescent (time to grow)

On its own two feet, the start-up may start to formalize its operations as an organization, based on past success or increasing expectations. Once finances become involved, considerations of IRS tax exemption will follow. Adherence to the original mission can spread among many volunteers. Some of the original volunteers are still in charge and what once was "volunteer" work starts to build up into more clerical and administrative work.

Adolescence	Normal Challenges	Benefits
<b>Program and services</b>	Building upon accomplishments	Starting to make a name for themselves
<b>Board of directors</b>	Transitioning management with leadership changes	Leading with new ideas
<b>Volunteers</b>	Training new volunteers	New volunteers getting on board
<b>Finances</b>	Increasing business management costs	Steady revenue stream
<b>Internal systems</b>	Focus on "doing" rather than managing the business	Understanding of right and wrong ways

## Mature (time to sustain)

Here, there is a real organizational shift into acting like a business and the decision-making process starts to obey “Robert’s Rules of Order.” Best of all, the knowledge learned from past stages is transformed into action. Success is realized in aspects of a working board of directors, plus adherence to an established bylaws and policy and procedures. Also, the work is balanced between volunteers and/or some paid professionals.

Mature	Normal Challenges	Benefits
Program and services	Evaluating satisfaction and implementing improvements	Receiving and reacting to constructive feedback
Board of directors	Efficacy of infrastructure	Governance is established
Volunteers	Communication	Volunteers are transforming into leaders
Finances	Proper capital allocation	Business-like
Internal systems	Implementation of policies and procedures	Existence of written instructions to follow

## Stagnant (time to renew)

At this point, complacency prevails and operations are stuck in a very decentralized system. The organization lacks any sense to change and/or doesn’t seek improvements. Work, though stabilized, does not match either the organization’s mission and/or the members’ needs.

Stagnant	Normal Challenges	Benefits
Program and services	Meeting members’ wants and needs	Removing unneeded programs
Board of directors	Adapting to change	Chance to refocus priorities
Volunteers	Recruitment and retention	Opportunity to refocus
Finances	Decreasing revenue streams	Removing programs helps overall budget
Internal systems	Finding better ‘workable’ ways	Discovering what really works

*Additional league? More instructional workshops?  
Another designed disc? A new multiple-day tournament?  
An extra committee? An upgraded database?  
Hiring?*

Comprehension of the inherent challenges and benefits within the stages is the first step of understanding growth. Growth may be a logical next step with apparent rewards (more money); though, it is a big decision that has consequences (fiscal management). Organizations—no matter what size—should consider these general advantages and disadvantages that shadow growth.

## Advantages for Growth

- Increased Revenue – more paying participants means more registration income
- Purchasing power for improved systems and/or infrastructure – larger budgets provide buying options.
- New and improved offerings – no more ‘status quo’ and more engaged members
- Member focused – gives members what they want/need
- Reinforces mission & vision – aligns with your organization’s direction

- Increases outreach – reach new target audience
- Generates more volunteer interest – allows for delegation of work
- Helps with leadership succession – brings a larger pool of volunteers

## Disadvantages for Growth

- Price increases – increased costs could turn off prospects
- Capacity limits – more players require additional playing fields
- Communication issues – extra effort to explain changes and justify expenditures that could require specific marketing and promotion
- More Responsibilities – more offerings means more demands and liabilities
- Requires more work for Board of Directors – expands the Board’s oversight scope
- Increases complexity of the infrastructure – adds another to-do that someone has to address
- Dilutes from existing core programs – takes (players, volunteers, money) away from traditionally successful programs
- Fear of change – it’s human nature, but could cause failure

The next step is to evaluate feasibility. Without it, your organization may be allowing growth in before they want it. Responding to a need or opportunity is a good start; though, do your homework weighing all the factors and make an informed decision.

To decide whether growth is right for your organization, leadership must decide what is best for the organization and its effects on the entire organization.

### Key Knowledge Leadership Should Seek to Determine Growth Opportunities

1. **Sustenance:** Definition of necessary human, financial, technology and physical resources
2. **Market:** Identification and quantifying the need
3. **Forecast:** Prediction of sustainability and longevity
4. **Capacity:** Evaluation of integration into current functions

### 5. Advantages & Disadvantages: Specific benefit(s) & drawback(s)

In general, ensure that the growth—whether it is a product or service—fills a real need. Do not try to create a need. For smaller groups, any program brings bigger risks, so thorough research is even more essential. An idea for a program may start out as a hunch that the leadership (without proper homework) thought members would welcome. As a result, your program may not be as successful and assume substantially more risk. Instead, invest some time and resources to research and confirm your members’ needs.

## Handling Growing Pains

After your leadership has completed their homework and approved the growth opportunity, it’s time to prepare for growth. The following are lessons to learn in your preparation:

### Program and Services

**Communication issues** Communicate before, during, and after all changes in your offerings. Better yet, plan for adequate human and financial resources to over-communicate (budgeting for additional web site changes, purchasing a subscription to an HTML-email broadcasting service, pay a professional designer to create promotional brochures, etc.) By not properly communicating, you risk failure of the program just because members didn’t know about the facts or rationale for the change.

A smaller program may have a harder time getting the attention it wants from potential players. Limiting the market segment will restrict the scope to whom you target.

*For example: One summer league has always been offered to local ultimate players in the summer season. The league is successful with 10 teams. The leadership seeks to start another league to attract more skilled players. After registration closes for both leagues, the leadership realizes that the new league has 2 teams and the traditional summer league has 6 teams. The organization seeks to find more players and targets local universities. Since the summer has started, possible participants for either league have either moved away or have agreed to other obligations. Without any communications or promotions about the change, both leagues may have suffered.*

**Be member-focused** After the offerings are complete, utilize evaluations as a mechanism for

feedback, especially directly after first year offerings. Seek to refine your program with the received feedback so you do not repeat “first-year” mistakes. Adding a comments section to any survey is recommended since your survey may not have covered all the issues provides the chance to express feedback from participants. Small programs may have a harder time ensuring that programs fit their members’ needs. With a small pool of players, you may not be able to obtain a solid representative sample as you conduct research.

Continually consider feedback mechanisms from the participants in your programs. Find out what they *really* like and what they don’t care much about. You may discover your organization is spending more time on things members like least! Understand your members’ needs and make appropriate changes.

*For example: Your organization has been selling one disc for the past 8 years. The current disc is the standard white plastic emblazoned with the organization’s logo. A board member thinks it’s time to change the product with a new design and color. Without taking the pulse of the membership, the group spends one thousand dollars on the new design and someone cuts a check to purchase 500 discs. Four months later, supplies are much more than demand.*

## Board of Directors

**Smooth Transitions** It is very challenging to find individual members with appropriate skills and experience, plus a willingness to accept the responsibilities and time commitments of being officers and board members. Build-in time and energy for your leadership to spend looking for members who display a high level of participation. Invite those identified to participate in some of the organization’s work (The worse they can say is ‘No.’). Your recruitment efforts will help insure an orderly succession of leadership.

**Shift mind-sets** Resistance to growth is common. Some volunteer leaders may view initial infrastructure growth as distracting or draining. Or, leaders may find it hard and painful to adapt to new (improved) ways. Your leadership is in place to commit to its decisions and assure everyone that today’s growing pains will eventually be valuable for the organization as a whole.

## Volunteers

**Channel volunteer energy** Your organization can grow quicker than the existing infrastructure allows, so streamline volunteerism. Being volunteer-dependent, you must trust your volunteers beyond the

board of directors. However, do not “cry wolf” for volunteers. If your board is not prepared to evolve from a role of management into more delegation-oversight, then do not ask for volunteers. Clear and set expectations need to be given to start volunteer work. When eager volunteers are not utilized, you may jade them for any future requests.

Create a system to connect interested volunteers with organizational needs. Turning positions traditionally led by volunteers into staff jobs may be difficult, but you must consider doing so if fulfilling your organization’s mission becomes threatened by poor focus or nonperformance.

*For example: Over the summer, Joan was unemployed but searching for a graphic design job. Joan’s team captain, David—a board member—knew the organization had an unfilled position for web site designer. David asked her whether she would be interested in this type of work and forwarded her the project description and expected outcomes. Joan considered the project and was looking to increase her portfolio, so she was happy to accept the assignment. Three weeks later, Joan presented two options for the board of directors to consider and moved to have the membership make the final decision.*

Seriously consider the risk of burnout of that dedicated group that always does things for your organization. Over reliance on these incredibly dedicated folks is risky business. Consider other viable options that offer continuity and some organizational security such as working with employees who are outsourced, part-time, temporary, contracted, insourced, paid staff, interns, or paid with a stipend. More ideas on this can be found in the *Ultimate Organizer’s Resource Manual*, “Organizational Structures” by Jonathon Francis, page 5.

## Finances

**Understand your assets** Develop clear financial reporting and know what capital you can access. Though growth in revenue typically leads to increased resources, success in growth does not necessarily guarantee financial stability. Before agonizing about investments and adding operating expenses, you may realize that you have an abundance of unrestricted cash that you could allocate for salaries, marketing or specific projects.

Sponsorships are another option that is available to offset business costs. Sponsorships may be as simple as a website banner ad, which pays for the monthly hosting fee; a mention in your newsletter, which pays the postage expenses; to something more complex

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like an advertisement sign at your playing fields, which pays for the day's field permit.

**Smart investments** The biggest expense you may have is the start-up investment for research and marketing of the new program. Realize that some business aspects, like graphic design or marketing and printing, are better left to the professionals. If print promotions are not in the budget, then at a minimum, prioritize to have an updated web site. The web site will be a true reflection of your organization, so be sure it makes the statement you want it to.

## Internal Systems

**Learn to delegate** Do NOT keep trying to do everything yourself! For volunteer-dependent groups, it is easy to attempt to become all things to all people and yet not be great at any one thing. As more people come into an organization, you might struggle to keep everyone moving in the same direction, but it's crucial to spread the work around.

**More growth, less agility** As you set infrastructure systems and internal procedures, organizations become more bureaucratic and less of a do-it-yourself atmosphere. Plus, organizational leaders may get caught up in day-to-day issues and lose touch with members. Don't allow the written procedures to be disregarded; they were established for a reason, so see to it they are implemented and adhered to.

## Strategy

The related issues that confront growth are usually on a particular program or service, or on a specific organizational aspect. Typically, they can be properly processed and implemented within a short (3-6 months) or intermediate (next year) time frame.

When your organization is focusing more long-term and on the entire organization, then you are ready for strategic plan development. Planning strategically supports an organization's ability to respond to both internal and external growth demands spanning over a few years.

Overall, strategic planning helps to clearly define an organization's mission and to establish realistic goals and objectives consistent with that purpose within the organization's capacity for implementation—all in a defined time frame. Plus, it provides clearer focus of organization and produces more efficiency and effectiveness.

## Further purposes of strategic planning include:

- insuring the most effective utilization is made of the organization's resources by focusing the resources on the key priorities.
- bringing together everyone's best and most reasoned efforts which have important value in assembling a consensus about where an organization is moving.
- communicating goals and objectives.
- providing a base from which progress can be evaluated and establishing a mechanism for informed change (when needed).

Supporting the development of a planning process can help an organization's leadership clarify its direction and make it easier to differentiate growth opportunities worth pursuing from those likely to disrupt operations.

## Summary

Growth requires an understanding of the nuances of organizational life stages. The framework of self-actualization within each stage leads to assessing specific growth opportunities and then careful planning. In exchange for the benefits of growth, local and regional Ultimate organizations must contend with prospective challenges. Growth is a controllable issue that can be properly evaluated and allowed within your organization—or not. As your organization seeks to “grow up,” growth preparation is essential to handle expected growing pains. Eventually, there will be a need for assistance to solve major problems which is a good time to start thinking about your future and a long-term strategic plan.