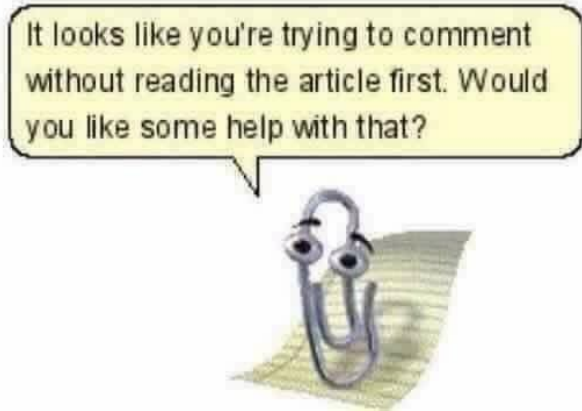
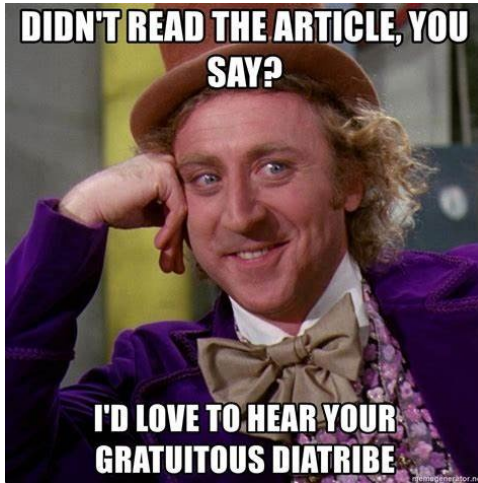


Freemasonry has a membership problem (which has caused a leadership problem)

by Midnight Freemason Contributor

WB Darin A. Lahners



Emeritus contributor Robert Johnson published an article this past Wednesday on this blog, [The Midnight Freemasons: Not Leadership](#), which has these key takeaways (From his TL/DR version of the article):

- *Freemasonry as an organization has no stance, responsibility, or obligation to teach Leadership.*
- *Leadership can be learned within Freemasonry, but it is no different than how it is learned in other organizations – including real-life work experience. We are not special – which means, it isn't our mission.*
- *There is nothing wrong with hosting leadership training as long as it is: 1. Secondary or tertiary to the understanding, application, and continuing study of the Philosophy of Freemasonry. 2. Does not demand a Grand Lodge Budget line-item expense that surpasses that of Masonic Education. 3. Qualified individuals who are leaders in the real world, with actual credentials, and have resumes that have been validated, must lead these workshops or camps.*

RJ asked me to write a follow-up to his article, so without further ado, I wanted to expand on some of what RJ had to say as well as how it relates to some current issues that our Fraternity is facing. I believe they are interrelated as we discuss leadership.

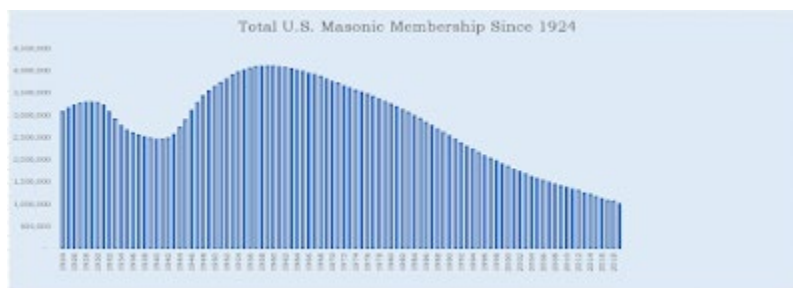
Point One:

Freemasonry has a membership problem which has caused a leadership problem.

You might want to write this down:

Freemasonry has a membership problem which has caused a leadership problem.

Freemasonry has an obsession with membership numbers because we have been declining from our post-WW1/WW2 numbers. These numbers were artificially inflated by the men who came back from those conflicts and felt that they were missing the comradery that many of them had become accustomed to during their combat tours. The graph below shows that we hit our high watermark of membership in 1959 when we had a total of 4.1 million members, out of approximately 53.3 million males over the age of 20, meaning that around 7.7% of the eligible male population were Freemasons. In 2022, there were 881,219 members in the US according to MSANA out of approximately 128.4 million males over the age of 20, meaning that less than 1% (approximately .06%) are Freemasons. I used the age of 20 because some jurisdictions require a man to be 18 years of age while others require 21 years of age for membership, so I settled on 20 years of age as a median. The US census data usually had an age distribution in units of 5 years, so 20 years of age was also easier to use as a starting point. Even though the peak of our membership happened sixty-five years ago, it seems that we keep chasing this unicorn.



Graph courtesy [U.S. Membership Statistics – Masonic Service Association of North America \(msana.com\)](https://www.msana.com)

Masonic bodies have decided that quantity of members is the measurement of the success of our organization, instead of the quality of our membership. Because of using an incorrect metric to judge the success of our organization, and not upholding our standards for membership, some masonic lodges have collectively turned the ballot box into a turnstile. In some cases, the only qualities that they look for are a heartbeat, a bank account, and the ability to say yes or no to the investigation committee. In fact, the only thing that might get a candidate black-balled from joining a lodge or Masonic body are qualities that shouldn't even be discussed in our Fraternal gatherings, like a member's sexuality, race, religion, or political affiliation.

We need to stop pretending that every man who is a Mason is good. We have some members that aren't good men. Some of these men, men who should never ever have set foot into a Masonic lodge, now are appointed and elected leaders in our fraternity.

In the real world, leadership problems occur when employees are promoted based on their job skills and not their leadership skills. When employees in the real world are promoted based on

their job skills, and they need formal, ongoing training on how to be good supervisors or leaders, they usually end up as poor leaders and end up having the below leadership problems.

- They have communication issues.
- They are in constant conflict with other managers or employees.
- Difficulty dealing with their employee's demands.
- They are resistant to change.
- Their employees have low morale.
- They do not take responsibility for their decisions or have no initiative to make decisions.
- Their employees have low motivation.
- They use an outdated leadership style, usually one which is authoritarian.¹

In theory, Freemasonry should not have any of the above leadership issues. Our leadership is elected democratically to the main leadership positions in almost every Masonic organization. At least, that's what is supposed to happen, more on that later. Reading the above leadership problems, how many of you feel that many of those could apply to at least one or more Masonic bodies you belong to? The fact that you said yes, says all you need to know.

Why is this? We currently have men in leadership positions in Freemasonry who have no business being in a leadership position. Freemasonry is a bureaucracy, and it requires a lot of members to serve in leadership positions to keep the Masonic machine running. Members who are appointed to leadership positions at the District and Area levels are usually not appointed based on their leadership abilities, but because they are good at memorization and mimicry. Furthermore, because some of these men have waited patiently in the progressive line of whatever body, kept their mouths shut, and placated the current leadership, membership advances them election cycle after election cycle.

In Freemasonry, like in business, when bad leaders are put in positions to appoint others into leadership roles, they will appoint those who also believe them to be good leaders. This leads to them surrounding themselves with sycophants that will further inflate their belief that they are entitled to their leadership roles. These men end up getting a fancy title and apron, and with it, the power and influence to maintain the status quo. The law of probability means that there will be a distribution of men who are good leaders with those who are terrible ones in these positions, and varying degrees in between.

While I agree that leadership training should not be Freemasonry's primary objective, I do believe that Leadership Development training is desperately needed in our organizations, usually at every level. I will go a step further than RJ and state that if Masonic bodies are going to do leadership development training, the training needs to be taught by an accredited organization that specializes in Talent Development. We can ill afford to use Masonic Leaders who are not qualified or accredited to teach leadership development. Just because I have taken multiple leadership training courses, I do not consider myself qualified to instruct one. On

top of this, some of the elected officers in the Grand Lines of Masonic Organizations and some of the members appointed to the Masonic bureaucracy are the members who need the leadership training the most, so they should not be involved in teaching something they are not good at.

We also have to acknowledge that no amount of leadership development training will turn a bad leader into a good leader. We have those predisposed to the philosophy of Servant Leadership within our fraternity, and these are the leaders that Freemasonry needs to promote and elect. Servant leaders put the needs of their team members first and strive to create an environment where everyone can thrive. This style of leadership is particularly well-suited for all-volunteer organizations, where the success of the organization depends on the dedication and hard work of its volunteers.² The experience of leadership in any organization can help men predisposed to be good leaders become better ones,. However, those who are bad at leadership will believe themselves to be great leaders. They will learn nothing from their leadership experience because they believe they have nothing left to learn. Furthermore, the Progressive Line often means that when we have bad leaders in our organizations, they continue to get promoted or elected because:

Point Two:

The majority of Masonic membership is only concerned with maintaining the status quo.

You might want to write this down:

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Freemasonry suffers from the Status Quo bias. The status quo bias is a type of cognitive bias that involves the preference that things stay as they are or that the current state of affairs remains the same.³

Progressive lines of leadership keep advancing. On the rare occasion where there is competition for an office, we see the membership side with the status quo. In some cases, when it's time to elect the junior most officers into the Grand progressive lines, these lines will ask for interested men to apply. However, when it comes time to vote for the leadership of the Grand Line at the Grand session, only one candidate is offered to the membership. Membership usually is not allowed to know anything about the other applicants, as the applicant put forward is the one who best fits the siloed group think of the other Grand officers in that line. I envision a scene similar to what I've illustrated below from Todd Browning's Freaks. Imagine the officers of that Grand Line dancing inebriated on the table screaming: "One of us! One of us!"



While these other candidates can run from the floor at these Grand Sessions, they are not the candidates who have the backing of the bureaucracy of the Masonic leadership of that particular organization. The only way wholesale change can happen at a Grand level requires the membership to revolt against the status quo, and put leaders into each office in that line who would be willing to make wholesale changes to their organization and they would have to replace each cog in the Masonic bureaucracy with those who would implement their vision. Membership would also have to be willing to be courageous enough to vote for legislation that would implement change.

Unfortunately, a majority of our members are unwilling to vote for change. This means that our leadership problems are a direct result of our membership. Regardless of what majority of the vote an election for a leadership position requires or an amendment needs to pass, both require a majority of our member's vote. Ergo: The problematic leaders in our organizations are a direct result of the membership. The members who voted them into the fraternity, the members who cast votes for them to remain in power, or the members who appointed them to a leadership position.

Let's be honest with ourselves, on the off chance that a visionary leader or leaders would be elected or appointed into these bodies, they immediately put a target on their back by those who defend that status quo if they rock the boat too much. As Freemasons, even though it might not be our jurisdiction, what is happening in Texas, and DC, and apparently in upper echelons of leadership in Appendant Bodies should make us all embarrassed. Is this really how we want to portray ourselves to the profane world? I realize that there are two sides to every story, but from an outsider looking in, it reaffirms everything I've said so far.

As an organization, Freemasonry is so beholden to our past, our history, and our sacred landmarks, to the status quo; that we seem incapable of thinking about the future. The landscape of decaying Masonic temples that exist in small towns across America proves me correct. In many cases, our departed brethren built magnificent structures, never thinking once that at some point, the cost to maintain the building might cause the lodge they so dearly loved to merge with another or close entirely. And yes, while I said membership numbers are not the

measurement of our organization's success, we still need a membership to continue to be an organization.

Yet, instead of focusing on making decisions about what we want for our future, we have members and leaders who continue to kick the can down the road. Because our average age of membership is in its early to mid-'60s, the members that are in my age demographic and younger are going to be the ones who are going to have to make the difficult decisions to close and consolidate our masonic lodges, temples, chapters, councils, valleys, etc. in the next ten to twenty years, again because the brethren who protect the status quo didn't have the forethought to start the conversations, the hard conversations early. Hopefully, I'm wrong, and we have enough good leaders in place who have created five-year plans, and succession plans, and they have started to have these conversations.

Even one of the most successful marketing campaigns that Freemasonry has ever had, the "Not Just a Man..." marketing campaign, is five years old, which in marketing terms is ancient history. In my own personal opinion, the one thing that we could use to help market Freemasonry to men today is Masonic Education. Why Masonic Education? Masonic Education is like a gym workout for your brain.

RJ states that Leadership Training should not demand a Grand Lodge Budget line-item expense that surpasses that of Masonic Education. This is because, in our personal experience, Masonic Education is not thought of or utilized as an asset to the fraternity or to its membership, so it is not prioritized. What men get out of Masonic Education is something that a majority of other civic organizations cannot provide, yet, many of our members and leaders eschew it.

Why is this? They do not understand what Masonic Education is. There seems to be a prevailing thought that Masonic Education equals teaching of Esoteric philosophy. Because of this, Masonic Education is either thought to be of little or no value to the practical application of Freemasonry. Often Masonic education is pushed as things that classify as Masonic Instruction, Leadership training, Officer Training, or teaching ritual and floorwork. While both develop membership, there is a distinct difference between Masonic Instruction and Masonic Education.

Point Three:

Masonic education is not Leadership training, Officer Training, or Ritual/Floorwork instruction.

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Masonic Instruction is learning the ritual, floor work, and everything else that relates to the work being performed within a tyled lodge. It is also the teaching of those skills that will help develop members' leadership and management abilities. It is part of member development which requires the instructor to be proficient in the skill that they are teaching, which is why you see those who have passed the Board of Grand Examiners tests instructing ritual and floor work. This is why I will reiterate the point I made above, leadership development training needs to be taught by an accredited organization that specializes in Talent Development.

While I have a great appreciation for our Ritualists and those who do excellent floor work, I am always amazed that some of these men have no desire to understand where the ritual or floor work came from and what it actually means. Masonic Education is learning about the meanings behind the work being performed within a tyled lodge space. It is a study of the philosophies of the world, the liberal arts and sciences, Masonic ritual, the sacred volumes of law from the various world religions, Masonic history, and esoterics. It is the nurturing of the member's intellect, imagination, and spiritual growth. It is the key to understanding how to follow the instructions left on the trestleboard which guide us as we struggle to shape our rough ashlar into a perfect one in our personal quarries. It is part of member development which can be undertaken alone, but it really should be done in a group setting, which is why it should be prioritized as a part of our meeting experience.

When done properly in a group setting, men will let their guard down. When this occurs, you see the actual working of brotherly love. You see men who might be polarized oppositely from each other in the profane world agree on something. Every member has a voice during Masonic education. Because of this, it allows the exchange of differing ideas and concepts to flow freely. It is through Masonic education that our membership develops their ability to think independently and philosophically and take the lessons taught by our kindred science and apply them in the profane world.

This being said, maybe we should not be surprised when some of our Grand Lines promote Masonic instruction as Masonic Education. An educated membership is a membership that will ask questions, study the constitution and bylaws of that particular body, and demand change. It is much easier to instruct the membership how to memorize our rituals and mimic floor movements, what duties they should perform in each chair in the lodge room, and how they should manage the lodge when they become the presiding officer. It is easier to have a membership full of parrot masons squawking in unison: "One of us, One of us" than to have a membership that asks questions and demands accountability and transparency of its leadership.

Our leadership problems have been caused by membership, and they can only be fixed by membership. Each of us must begin to be courageous at our local lodges and tell our brethren who want to give signed petitions out like candy on Halloween that you will blackball any candidate they bring to the floor for a vote if they do not make a concerted effort to get to know that man for months before offering them membership. We must identify and vote alternative candidates into power in cases where the leadership of that organization is not

doing its job. We must bring up legislation at our grand sessions that will move Freemasonry forward into the future, and if it does not pass, we must continue to bring it up until it does, no matter how long it takes. Change in Freemasonry doesn't happen overnight, it happens very slowly, but we'll get there eventually. It's just a matter of time. We must have the patience and stay the course.

~DAL

1. <https://businesstrainingexperts.com/common-problems-caused-by-poor-leadership-skills-and-how-to-fix-them/#:~:text=A%20list%20of%20the%20most%20common%20problems%20your,Low%20motivation%208%20Problems%20managing%20peers%20More%20items>
2. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/servant-leadership-all-volunteer-organizations-lanning#:~:text=Servant%20leaders%20put%20the%20needs,hard%20work%20of%20its%20volunteers.>
3. <https://www.verywellmind.com/status-quo-bias-psychological-definition-4065385#:~:text=The%20status%20quo%20is,of%20affairs%20remains%20the%20same.>

Darin Lahners is our Managing Editor. He is a host and producer of the "Meet, Act and Part" podcast as well as a co-host of an all-things-paranormal podcast, "Beyond the 4th Veil." He is currently serving the Grand Lodge of Illinois Ancient Free and Accepted Masons as a member of the Committee on Masonic Education He is a Past Master of St. Joseph Lodge No.970 in St. Joseph. He is also a plural member of Homer Lodge No. 199 (IL), where he is also a Past Master. He's also a member of the Scottish Rite Valley of Danville, a charter member of Illinois Royal Arch Chapter, Admiration Chapter No. 282, Salt Fork Shrine Club under the Ansar Shrine, and a grade one (Zelator) in the S.C.R.I.F. Prairieland College in Illinois. He is also a Fellow of the Illinois Lodge of Research. He was presented with the Torok Award from the Illinois Lodge of Research in 2021.