

SCGIS INTERNATIONAL CHAPTER FORMATION GUIDEBOOK

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LEADING A CHAPTER

Starting an SCGIS Chapter means you'll be the leader, in the beginning at least. This is an important responsibility, but nothing to be afraid of. Traditionally a leader in a business or an organization is someone at the top making a lot of decisions and working hard to motivate everyone else to work towards a common goal. Most conservationists, and conservation GIS folks in particular, are more accustomed to working alone out in nature or working with others as peers or colleagues. In this respect, SCGIS has more in common with a movement than it has with an organization, and SCGIS leadership is often more about listening and helping your colleagues and friends figure things out and learn new skills. Like I said, it's nothing to be afraid of. As you work with your new chapter and get experience organizing meetups, events, training and scholarships, you'll find that leading an SCGIS Chapter and working with conservation GIS folks has elements in common with both traditional and social movement kinds of leadership.

A good SCGIS leader starts by listening to your colleagues about the issues and challenges they face in trying to do effective conservation work. Just like a good GIS, a good leader can then integrate all of these diverse interests into a common vision, and write it up as a compelling vision statement. As you share and explain this vision statement with your new chapter, it will spur interesting discussions and new ideas that will add to the statement and make it a truly integrated common vision, shared by all. A good SCGIS leader is less interested in taking credit for anything, and more interested in giving credit away to others.

In SCGIS leadership your goal is to encourage *everyone* to think like a leader, to listen to their peers, to act on what they do. Unlike traditional leadership, people often join movements not because of the charisma of the person at the top, but because they want to make a difference in the world and want to be around people who can help them and who they can help in turn. A good leader in this case works hard to support and encourage the people around them. The leader's job in a movement is to understand and express the common mission, not only so folks can understand it, but so that they can own that mission for themselves, begin to formulate it and express it to others.

To grow, the chapter must also be able to gain the confidence of donors, and teach others to be successful in gaining the confidence of donors. As with everything else, this starts with the vision statement and how well you are able to make it into a common vision that all of your chapter members identify with and feel strongly about. The key to a successful conversation with a donor is the passion and commitment you feel in how you describe the vision and work of your SCGIS chapter to them. At the same time you have to take the initiative to research each donor and get a good understanding of *their* vision, *their* mission statement. Only when you are able to understand and talk about the common vision you might share with them should you begin to approach them for a discussion. Many donors provide this kind of information, but for a more detailed understanding of their priorities do a thorough review of every grant they have made in the past year, and look for the common patterns in the work they support to help clarify what they specifically look for in what they fund. Sometimes the stated vision doesn't tell you all-important details about *how* they implement that vision. A review of what they actually fund

will help you understand the how. In general, SCGIS falls in the category of “Capacity Building”, typically dominated by large US and European technical projects and universities. SCGIS is unique in being much more grassroots, much more peer-to-peer, much more internationally based, and much less centralized, than the competition. See Section 5 for more details about fundraising, and Section 4T-7 for more details about membership and dues.

Successful SCGIS leadership therefore draws on some elements of traditional single-leader skills, such as initiative, entrepreneurship and formulating and expressing a powerful common goal, but the deeply-rooted collaborative nature of conservationists demands that a leader can only succeed if they share and inspire leadership in every colleague. There are not many examples in the world of this kind of an organization. As a result, SCGIS is slower-growing than other similar organizations. We care about taking the time to make sure that with every step forward, our principles and values remain strong, and every member is honored and respected for the leadership they give.

As you get more experience, your work in building a chapter or serving on an SCGIS committee, board or project will often need to draw upon other practical skills of traditional leadership. You’ll often need to coordinate the efforts of many volunteers to ensure that meetings happen on time, questions are answered promptly, and problems are solved. Even so, always be looking for ways to build the competence and confidence of those around you so that they can take on leadership themselves as they feel ready, and continue to support them to make sure they don’t get too overwhelmed. Remember, volunteers don’t get paid, their reward is feeling that they have helped and made a difference. It’s the duty of a leader to ensure that volunteers get work they are able to do well and feel good about, and whatever is left over falls to the leader to complete, however boring or uninspiring it may be. That’s the true test of service, are you willing to take on all the tedious grunt work that has to be done, often for no credit, so that your volunteers can be successful and take credit for the more enjoyable tasks they are able to excel at?