

More Thoughts on the Ale 1988

People said the 1988 Mid-West Morris Ale in Ann Arbor was a great Ale, and we congratulated ourselves on our good work. But that work was really only to make the Ale possible, and to keep things from going wrong. Even if our plans had been perfect, we couldn't have made people have a good time. The people who came made it fun -- they really made the Ale happen. And we were also LUCKY. A few important things could easily have gone wrong; it could have rained, or people and facilities we hired could have failed us despite the best of intentions, and then it might not have been great. So do as much as you can to make it perfect, but also pray for luck. Expect last-minute heart attacks and brain fever, but remember, an Ale is really just a big party -- we do this for fun!

What follows is everything I could think of to help you put on your own Ale (if it wasn't covered in our squire's report). The main points of advice involve attitudes and processes that worked well for us, and should work well anywhere. And perhaps the description of some of the inevitable conflicts we had will help you plan to keep your team together before, during and after the Ale!

One of the first "directional" decisions made was to focus on getting the basics right, rather than paying much attention to having an interesting theme, or good frills. The goal was a functional ale. Another was that everything that could possibly be done ahead of time, should be; way ahead of time, if possible. Of course people naturally felt there was plenty of time; why do anything now? But the pressure of having to report on something by the next Ale meeting was usually effective in getting things moving, even eight months before the Ale. The Czars, and a few other people with heavy Ale workloads, benefitted most from this approach. Everything resolved was one less thing to worry about -- on to the next! And it's true -- everything takes longer than you think. Our emphasis on trying to do things early was just a way to get them done in time.

As it turned out, some things still happened later than we planned, the first letter being the most important. Since there are usually only two mailings, the early one and the registration packet, if you want

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feedback you have to get your stuff into the first letter. And by the second letter (in March for us) most things about the Ale have to be settled, especially the budget. So the real deadline for many tasks is driven by when the letters should go out, not by the Ale date. A lot of us hadn't realized this, and were only saved by the general concentration on earliness.

When the committees were formed, people seemed to sort themselves out fairly easily, according to what they cared about and were willing and able to do. Small committees announced their need for more members. Our team is large enough that the load was spread out pretty well. On smaller teams a different structure might be more appropriate, since the same people would keep showing up on all the committees! Most of our committees had about 5-6 people, and typically a core of 2-3 people were the ones really involved in accomplishing the goals. No one was on more than two committees.

There were never any official committee heads and this worked well for us; leadership emerged naturally and in several cases changed over time with a minimum of fuss. If there had been official heads this would have been more difficult. We did have a system of "contact people" for each committee, who were supposed to know what was going on if you asked them, because we thought keeping track of things might be complicated otherwise. But it didn't turn out to be necessary. It was obvious who was playing a central role at the moment because they would be doing the talking at Ale meetings. By the time we got to the Ale most tasks had one person clearly in charge (although there were a few that still needed a "coalition government" and some that anyone handy took care of).

Our decision-making process included the "test" of bringing committee work to the Ale meeting for review. It seemed to work best to bring plans that were semi-final rather than final; if the feedback says to start over it's less painful at this stage! Some people also sought guidance before they began, or in the middle. The point is, we didn't want a "behind closed doors" atmosphere and we needed the group reactions to keep us on track.

The process of planning the Ale, especially with two very different co-Czars, tended to polarize the team into two groups; worriers and optimists. Frankly, I'm biased in favor of worriers. I've found that deliberate over-estimates of requirements for money, labor and time often come out right on target. Creative worrying is a good way of thinking of what could go wrong so you can prevent it. If, on the other hand, you believe everything will be fine and there's no need to worry, you'll grudge the extra effort necessary to meet deadlines, think about safeguards, and double-check agreements, and you'll be caught unprepared when things inevitably go wrong.

The last week before the Ale is really a different ball game from the rest of the year's planning. All those miscellaneous things that weren't that important have to be done now. Sudden major problems get their chance to kill you off. Some people still won't want to do anything until Friday! Thursday night will be crazy, full of last-minute errands -- mostly transporting things from one place to another. "We forgot to" or "Do you know who has" or "Did you remember to check" will begin most sentences. I think it would have helped for us to have had one last mid-week Ale meeting, where everyone could be briefed on who was going to do what. Once the Ale starts, everything flies right out of control, you don't know what's happening and you can't find anybody you're looking for. (And when you do find them, you can't remember what you wanted them for!) That's when it helped us to have one person for each "sphere," who knew what to do and could get it done without having to consult with anyone.

People putting on the Ale will have the least experience of it -- most of us have no idea what the Ale was really like for "normal" Morris dancers from other teams. Because we were planning the Ale for them rather than ourselves, though, we overlooked a couple of our own needs. For instance, we weren't providing Friday dinner to Ale participants, and it didn't occur to us that WE would need dinner, since many of us had been at camp all day. We also made no provision for being together as a team during the weekend, which was especially needed when the team was split for touring both days. Don't let this happen to you!

Fae Furst