

Achievement Program – It's NOT the Paper, It's the Individual Skill and Desire

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Participation in our NMRA Achievement Program is supposed to introduce individual members and modelers to a variety of challenges and learning experiences that will expand their skill set and add to their overall enjoyment of their hobby. The Achievement Program is one of the most significant tangible benefits of NMRA membership.

Unfortunately, many members avoid participation in the program because they are hampered by two longstanding but incorrect perceptions; there is far too much paperwork, and I don't need someone judging my work.

So first let's dispel the perceptions and then we'll provide a proven process to expand the participation in the program.

Over a thirty year span of my time in the Navy, the one thing I learned was that the job was not done until the paperwork was complete. It was not until I had my first tour as an Executive Officer (the number 2 guy) that I came to fully understand that getting the paperwork done meant completing the staff work and doing the actual report or letter composition so the Captain (the number 1 guy) could sign it. With that understanding in mind, the application to AP was easy. The only absolute requirement for the member, with regard

to "paperwork" was a final signature on a Statement of Qualification.

With respect to the "judging" perception, a bit of education and demonstration will go a long way to putting that one to bed. There is no need to bad mouth contest judging and the sometimes misunderstood contest outcomes when addressing what AP does. Contest and AP are separate programs addressing different goals. The more appropriate approach is to stick to the concept of evaluation, instead of judging, and assessing what the modeler was trying to do, and how well he did it. There is also a clear need to make sure that AP is not about perfection (although the program does not object to that level of work) but rather to stress superior modeling. To put things in perspective, 87 ½ points out of a possible 125 is 70 percent or a "C" grade. While your parents might not have accepted that while you were in high school or college (when they were paying the bills) that is the bottom line for AP. For further clarity, achieving the designation of MMR does not cause a mantle of greatness to fall over the modeler; it really identifies a person who has been willing and able to expand their individual horizons to participate in all aspects of the hobby and the NMRA. More specifically, the requirements that include active participation in NMRA leadership, through volunteer service, or sharing experience and knowledge as an "author," actually have little to do with your organizational skills or your competence as a writer or presenter.

Those categories are the “giving” back elements of the program and set the stage for your continued willingness to share after you earn the MMR designation

“That’s all well and good,” you say, “but that does not make it any easier for me to get involved in the program.” The answer is the AP on steroids. In the classical approach to AP, the Division or Region AP chairs wait for the modeler to make contact to arrange for an assessment. That procedure resembles those old TV ads about the Maytag repairman. That methodology just does not work very well. If, however, we reverse the roles and have the AP chairs calling members asking for an invite to visit, the action picks up immediately. In addition, if every open house or operating session is also an intelligence-gathering mission with “AP agents” scouting out potential targets, the viability of the program increases several fold. As an example, I was given a copy of the layout tour book from the recent Narrow Gauge convention in the Seattle area. All of the layout owners are NMRA members and they are all potential AP targets. All it takes is a call to the modeler to arrange a visit to get a foot in the door. (Figure

1)



Figure 1 – “We’re from the NMRA and we are here to help”

Reversing the roles and responsibilities for initial contact and pressing the program may be offensive to the purists but we need to understand that increasing the number of participants (and eventually MMRs), without a decrease in the quality of the end product being evaluated, is beneficial to the organization and does not diminish the achievements of those who have already earned MMR status.

Another proven method of gaining interest is to provide AP assessment separate from contest participation at local clinics and meets. In PNR we have adopted a policy that allows a modeler to bring a model to a meet and enter it for AP evaluation only, Contest only, or both. AP evaluation is conducted separate from contest by a separate set of Evaluators and with the modeler present and able to answer questions and participate in the process. The evaluation is conducted as AP evaluation should be, with a concentration on the item under evaluation and without reference to anything else in the room. Only after the

AP evaluation is complete do the Contest Judges get their turn at the work presented for Judging. There are a couple of the elements that we have learned to include over time but they do not diminish the clear separation of AP evaluation and contest judging. We have found a much larger number of models showing up in the contest room and a greater participation in the AP evaluation event.

In PNR, thanks to the urging and demonstrated leadership of my friend Di Voss, we employ a “team” approach for AP visits to a modeler’s layout. Once the invitation to visit is received, a team of between 3 and 6 evaluators is assembled. During the actual visit, (Figure 1) an initial assessment of the areas (certificate subject matter) to be worked is determined with the modeler.

The team is broken down into area assignments and the work commences in a parallel mode. For example, one team may be working structure evaluation for Merit Award (Figure 2) while a second team is considering Civil engineer requirements (Figure 3) and a third reviewing the record for Volunteer.



Figure 2 “You did what”



Figure 3 “OK, That checks with the gauge”

The modeler is present throughout and available to answer any questions team members might have (Figure 4), or to provide any additional documentation they might need.



Figure 4 – Discussing the model rather than filling out forms

The first thing this approach does is to look at areas for which the modeler may not have considered themselves ready. Far too often members read more into

the instructions and opt for worse case scenario when trying to determine, for themselves, if they are ready for a certificate. The team can sort through a bunch of misgivings and come to a much more rational and appropriate conclusion. With the team approach we have also found that allowing evaluators to work on some areas individually presents better results. For example, if each member of the team doing structures completes evaluation of a structure separately and then trades notes with a second evaluator who also completes an independent evaluation, the end result is a better representation of the work and the modeler learns more from the process. My experience with the process is that it allows the individual evaluator to document what they find without the need to compromise in the process. (Figure 5)



Figure 5 – An Evaluator at work

The compromise, if any is necessary, will come after both have completed their work. (Figure 6)



Figure 6 – Comparing notes to reach agreement

For the “Nay-Sayers” steeped in the tradition of 10 “judges” to evaluate a car or structure (along with high intensity lighting, Optivisor, and detailed plans and photographs, of some prototype they are familiar with) my only recommendation is “Try it, you might like it”. The other advantage of this approach is that the modeler does not have to compile a stack of paper for each item under evaluation. The opportunity to talk through each evaluation and get the detailed information first hand, works for me. I certainly don’t need file cabinets of paper to support a Merit Award. There is a clear element of trust in the ability of team members to do the job correctly. But then again, why would you assign people to a team that you did not trust,

and know to have the requisite skill? The end result of a team visit to a layout is normally far more recognition than the member anticipated. In addition, the team can review other areas and leave the modeler with very specific understanding of what is required to complete work for other certificates. If the team starts the visit anticipating wide success, the visit will be positive and beneficial for everybody. Besides, how else do you get to actually visit and enjoy all those layouts you have heard about but never got the invitation to visit? For me, personally, every layout visit is a chance to learn more, and find new ways to solve problems that I am having with my work. Even though I am an MMR I am still learning and happy to have any opportunity to see how the other guys are doing it.

One final note is the actual results of a team visit, as provided by actual examples. I received a call from a fellow modeler asking if we could set up a visit for a Golden Spike review for a gent who was going to be open for a local meet. One team member visited and advised me that we really needed to do a more thorough visit. So, we arranged for a team visit and got the invitation. By the time we were finished we had executed the paperwork for eight certificates on work already completed by the modeler and he signed all the SOQ and the MMR SOQ before we left. More recently, we had a team request from a member who really had no idea where he was in the program and just wanted some one to

stop by and talk with him. The team visit resulted in five certificates, and the ground-work for three more being set. In Atlanta, during the recent 2013 National convention, an assessment team made up of evaluators from several regions paid a return visit to a layout that was on the tour list. When the team was finished with their work, the results were as expected, with five certificates completed. The real "lesson learned" from these experiences is that there are any number of members out there who have completed the necessary work, and just need to get someone to stop by and put the AP process in motion.

The "team" effort also has a major role in reaching the members who own modules as their layouts or who work within clubs and/or joint ownership layouts. We try to have a team visit each train show in the area so we can do assessments for the members who have modules set up in the shows. We also use the opportunity to recruit new members with the lure of AP evaluations. Club visits are a bit more challenging as we work out the percentages of work accomplished but most often the large size of a club layout affords ample opportunity for individuals to complete the necessary work. Making sure to include both module owners and clubs brings AP to the full membership.

In my home region, the AP on steroids approach has migrated from one division to all seven and the participation rate in AP is increasing. The division AP chairs are exercising their ability to

identify and assign properly qualified modelers to duties as evaluators. We periodically conduct training sessions to get more evaluators qualified. The more evaluators the merrier, just as long as quality is not compromised. The team approach also ends the constant complaints that you have to know somebody, or be somebody's friend, to get attention or get an evaluation completed. If it works in PNR, where a 60-mile drive for an evaluation visit, is one of the shorter trips (our record thus far is 300 miles plus, one way) it will work anywhere else. Why not give it a try? It really is possible to increase quantity without compromising quality. Try it. Who knows, you might even grow to like it.