

Association Changes on the Inside: Give Up 3 Bad Habits

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If you are worried about the prospect of association change, by now you know you aren't alone. Change is everybody's biggest challenge. But when you know that change has an **outside** and an **inside**, it becomes a little easier to decide what you need to do.

- The **outside** of change is finding new ways to deal with changes in markets, economies, and products.
- The **inside** of change is finding ways to alter your own Association's business habits in order to address those "outside" changes.

So, if you can see what's going on outside your organization, and the ways the economy is affecting you, then you know you need to make some changes on the inside. Here are three steps to take that will help improve your association's position in the marketplace of ideas and actions.

#1. Streamline Any Sloppy Governance Habits

Volunteer time is harder to get, and has to be used much more judiciously to produce good outcomes. People are too busy for meetings that don't produce results, or discussions that don't end in decisions. Focus groups with potential members of associations revealed that prospects weigh carefully their decision to join or not to join. How much more do they weigh the decision to volunteer for events, committees, or boards? And what factors decide whether they will continue or increase their volunteer work once they have started?

Example: One association debated about whether to revise the structure of their governance bodies and procedures. After some discussion, they agreed to revamp only the procedures for obtaining critical information and making strategic decisions. The result was a change in their meeting agendas, and the format for reporting on issues. This simple change accelerated the pace of meetings and retreats by discouraging the habit of returning to the same unresolved issues many times without a decision. New plans and commitments were made in a way that bypassed the usual struggle for consensus. Within three months, two unproductive committees disbanded, and the most action-oriented participants offered to revitalize the other groups.

TIP – Set one or two goals for every board and committee meeting and start each meeting by aligning on producing the goals. This gives you a compass to steer out of those off-track diversions and get back toward the main objective.

#2 Repair Unhealthy Executive Habits

Short-term political concerns tend to displace important long-term planning decisions. In times of economic pressure or other disruptive changes in the external environment, strategic plans need to be re-examined and revised to fit the new realities. There is usually no need to repeat the whole strategic planning process, but it will be important for executives and boards to take a fresh look at all of the association's high-level leadership documents: mission, vision, values, plans, measures of success, and goals and objectives.

Example: One association executive sponsored a conscientious review of key documents by staff and board members. She gave the instruction, "Don't rewrite these documents. Just tell

me what we need to do to stay on course with our long-term commitments.” The groups came up with a fresh list of Action Items to be completed in the next six months, with month-by-month timelines. This gave everyone a better grasp of the Association’s situation, and shifted the focus of key leaders in two ways. First, by looking at “big picture” documents, they could see the association’s purpose and goals in light of today’s environment. Second, they concentrated on making some changes quickly, and some items that had been forgotten or repeatedly postponed were given a new life and timetable for implementation.

TIP – To create a new and powerful context for deciding on short-term actions, have your executive team review your association’s mission and long-term goals. Then decide on new Action Items that should be implemented in the next 90 days.

#3. Quit the “Quick-Fix” Habit

Make peace with the facts: there is no “quick fix”. If you have a pressing revenue problem, the kind of changes you need will take a time and effort. Substantive organization changes require (1) a new burst of customer-commitment thinking, (2) some functional redesign work, and the (3) engagement of personnel in both of those things. The challenge of engaging people in planning and implementing change is often believed to be painful, but there are lots of methods today that use people’s creativity and love of members to reduce or eliminate the pain. In fact, shifting the entire organization to something as challenging as creating robust new non-dues sources of revenue can be a thrilling process of invention and play.

Example: One association held a lottery to collect the best ideas for new mission-relevant revenue streams. Then, after six new changes had been chosen for implementation, they set up a gambling casino so everyone could place a bet on which idea would finish first, finish last, or get so derailed that it would be forgotten. The pain evaporated in what one staff member said was “a boisterous game of musical chairs where people put their lunches, candy jars, and parking spaces at stake week after week”.

TIP – Involve your board and staff members in creating a long-term timeline for critical changes, and inventing ways to make the process interesting and enjoyable. Take steps to help everyone keep gaining momentum to reach the goals.

Finally, changing some of your internal practices goes much more smoothly when you invite your staff to co-author them with you. One executive’s idea is a good starting point:

We had a brown-bag lunch meeting and started making a list of ideas for ways we could simplify meetings and improve everyone’s productivity. We compared every idea to the mission statement on the wall to keep ourselves on track, and identified over ten internal changes that could help us all reach our goals faster. Then we posted the list on the wall and asked everyone to add their best ideas before the next meeting. When we got together again, we decided – as a group – on some specific actions to take, and assigned them to the people who wanted to see them through to completion.

The work of your Association is important and worthwhile. The job now is to find new ways of getting more and more people engaged in fulfilling your mission.