



By
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Transforming the A

Engagement, Daring Dreams and Insights from Stakeholders are Key

With resources continuing to be scarce, it is essential that association executives consider ways to completely revitalize their organizations. This is not the time for simple surface changes. The facade of change will not increase membership, create staff commitment or enhance revenue. Instead, leaders have to be able to consider total transformations that will make their associations viable today and beyond. This article presents a collaborative method for transformation. It is enhanced by conversations with association leaders who have been skillful at managing large and small scale transformations.

Beginning the Transformation

How does one begin on the path of total transformation? It is not as simple as pulling together a reorganization team or having a reorganization meeting to lament the pain of budget cuts and the need to do more with less. Nor is it as easy as simply restructuring key departments. Instead, leaders have to begin the process by purposefully engaging multiple stakeholders and challenging them to dream about who and what the association can be. These stakeholders can range from members to former members, from staff to vendors, from staff in allied societies to regulators who impact your industry. Rick Pillow, President of the Lynchburg-based Virginia Credit Union League has skillfully blended staff, board and credit unions of various sizes on taskforces that he has designed to strategize ways to meet member needs now and in the future. Pillow knows first hand what it is like to have to make major changes in an established, well-respected association. He has gone through the pain of downsizing and survived by maintaining direct, honest communication with staff. One of his critical messages to the people who remained after the downsizing was that the League had to make tough choices

and those choices had to reflect the core competencies identified as essential for long-term success. He boosted the confidence of the remaining team by reinforcing the fact that they demonstrate those core competencies, add value to the League and to its member organizations, the credit unions they serve.

Do not limit your notion of potential stakeholders. Think broadly. Invite input from a wide array of participants who touch the association, its members and their work. Marianna Kern Grachek, CEO of the American College of Healthcare Administrators, has been very strategic in connecting academics involved in long term care with the work of the association and its Academy. This enables members to have easy access to the theoretical perspectives that inform their work in the trenches of eldercare. She understands that she cannot possibly possess all of the competitive intelligence required for the association, its members or the profession they serve to flourish.

The dreaming process of the transformation is borrowed from the principles of Appreciative Inquiry. I adapt the concept and ask client organizations to concretize the notion of their best selves today and beyond. This is a specific focus not simply on who the association is and its current strengths, but an opportunity to really consider who the association needs to be to survive. It forces consideration of how everyone in the organization can

bring their best selves forward. Pillow cautions that while there is a need to plan and dream, it is not wise to plan too far out into the future because change happens so fast in today's business environment.

Creating Operational Reality

Once the vision of the future has been cemented in minds, the work begins to cement it in the hearts and hands of the people who will make it happen in operational reality. This is a lengthier process than many would imagine. When Michele Dennis took over the reigns as President of Building Owners and Managers Association of Greater Los Angeles, she wisely decided that rather than jump in with her own agenda for transformation, she would spend her first year listening, getting to know people in the association and in their membership base. She also used this initial year to get to know the strengths and weaknesses of the association. When she finally began to champion change, she opted not to go it alone. She enlisted the support of the board, the staff and various committee members. Her very engaged board owned the transformation of the association and willingly went out to speak about it throughout the industry. This certainly makes a president's job much easier.

Dennis did not propose changes that would draw the association away from its core purposes. Instead what she and the board offered were opportunities



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to refine who the association was and is from a strengths-based perspective. They identified their three core purposes: building a network or community for building owners and managers; education for their membership; and advocacy. Dennis held firm that these would be the only things the association did. They got rid of activities that were not related to the three core purposes. They eliminated programs that did not fit into the mission of the organization. Of course there were growing pains and departures. However, even through the recession BOMAGLA has enjoyed 92% member retention. Dennis has thoughts on why they continue to flourish. She says, "Members want us to be really good at what we are doing." There are clear rewards for that focus on excellence.

Stakeholders begin the arduous work of designing systems, supports, processes and practices that will make their dreams come true. They develop their own structures and, in affect, reorganize the entire organization based on who they intend to be. Dennis encouraged changes in the committee structure so that a broader base of volunteers could and would participate. She is also a strong believer in matching volunteers with their strengths and interests so that they will connect more deeply and serve the association with greater passion. She championed changing structures so that staff could interact more often and in greater depth with members. She encouraged them to visit members at their sites, connect with them personally

and not to rely so heavily on email. This enabled the staff to be more autonomous and to gain deeper knowledge of member needs, interests and expectations.

Allowing this kind of autonomy is a demonstration of trust. The senior leader knows that he or she does not have all of the answers, or even know all of the right questions to ask. They trust that others in the organization possess the breadth and depth of knowledge to partner in strategically positioning the association. They trust that the people closest to the member have a wealth of knowledge that can be channeled into creating a track record of replicable successes throughout the organization. These concepts are especially difficult for leaders who micromanage or who utilize autocratic rather than collaborative approaches to getting things done.

Change as a Survival Mechanism

The objective is not to create change simply for the sake of change. Rather, it is to create change that maximizes efficiencies throughout the enterprise. And there are certainly times when transformative change has to take place if an association is to survive. To Grachek and her team's credit, they have ushered the association through perilous financial times, increased membership and used technology to increase non-dues revenues. They have worked hard to revitalize their chapters and districts. The webinars they recently launched have been financially successful. This use of technology has met member's needs for relevant, easily accessible high quality education. Grachek states that they are also back in the black

on their Convocation. These dramatic improvements allow her, the board and the team to breathe a sigh of relief.

Transformative change has a greater likelihood of being sustained through the inevitable vicissitudes of association life if it is rooted and grounded in compelling business necessity. One sure fire way to fail at transformation is by embarking on it simply because it is in vogue or some executive gets a burr in his saddle and decides rapid fire change is in order. All of this work must be rooted in the clearly defined purpose of the association. In Pillow's case he and his executive team are clear on the three purposes the League serves: advocacy, education and compliance assistance.

Notice that stakeholder engagement is key to successful transformations. This means that the task is not simply left to a select group of handpicked senior managers or a cabal of entrenched board members. Instead, a variety of voices are heard and integrated throughout the transformation process. Robert Tanner Pascale and Jerry Sterning write about the power of engagement in "Your Company's Secret Change Agents."¹ They state that the key is to engage members of the community you wish to change or transform in the entire process of discovery so that they will become your evangelists. They hold that any change ought to bridge what is happening and what is possible for the organization. One of the initial questions is, "What are the possibilities for this organization?" Posing that question will get your team thinking beyond what is to the vast realm of possibilities for the association.

Total transformation requires that leaders be able to let go and allow for adaptive change to take place. Adaptive change is the type of core modification that has the potential to alter every aspect of an organization.² This type of change works best with leaders who are self-aware and who are willing to reflect often. These leaders possess sufficient humility to recognize the fact that no one of us is as smart as all of us. They know that combining multiple competencies, knowledge bases and skills will propel the association to reach its fullest potential. Dennis puts it best when she says, "Executives must be

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able to collaboratively create a compelling reason for change that people want to be a part of. They must be sure of the business reasons for the change and cannot bulldoze over people and try to make a transformation happen overnight.” The vision must be shared by a broad constituency of stakeholders who are willing to partner with the executive to make the transformation happen.

Summary

While some of the principles in this article may be counterintuitive for traditional, hierarchical leaders, they actually work. Organizational transformations can and do happen when stakeholders are invited to participate in the rebirth. When multiple insights are considered and integrated the association benefits from member and staff retention, revenue growth and limitless possibilities to fulfill its mission. The executives queried in this article make it clear that this is not easy work. There will be losses on the road to great gains.

Consider beginning this process by using it for small-scale transformations. As you develop more confidence in your ability to skillfully collaborate you will be able to take on greater challenges. You will also build a cadre of partners who see the potential in meaningful transformations that fully engage multiple stakeholders.

¹“Your Company’s Secret Change Agents,” by Robert Tanner Pascale and Jerry Sternin, Harvard Business Review, May 2005.

²Adapted from “A Survival Guide for Leaders,” by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, Harvard Business Review, June 2002.

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