



Membership Musical Chairs

Identifying Factors That May Be Hindering Membership Retention & Growth

Many membership organizations are experiencing declining retention rates and declining new member recruitments and in this economy it would be very easy to chalk it up to “the way it is” and let things continue as they are. But the reality is that many nonprofit organizations have been experiencing declines or stagnation (lack of real growth) for some time and the economy is just bringing those problems to light. Membership organizations that are run by all-volunteer staff have an especially challenging time maintaining steady growth unless they have a solid infrastructure, and thoroughly written policies and procedures in place to pass on those policies to the next round of volunteers. Declining membership or lack of real membership growth also means declining volunteers, which can lead to “musical chairs syndrome” and one-man (or woman) committees.

Musical Chairs Syndrome

This occurs when the same core group of board members and committee chairs just swap positions each year. Combined with declining membership, this can result in serious organizational stagnation. It’s even difficult to say which came first – the decline in membership or the “chair-swapping”. Decline in membership could create an environment that forces the current membership to handle more duties for a longer period of time. But, “chair-swapping” can also create an elitist, clique-like environment that actually dissuades people from becoming members if they see no opportunity to serve on prime committees or feel unwelcomed in a tight-knit group. Either way, this “lack of new blood” can be easily translated into “lack of new ideas” which can hamper or halt growth altogether. In extreme cases, an environment is created that actually discourages new ideas and growth.

One Man (or Woman) Committees

In a normal committee structure, a committee chair will be appointed by the board president and that chair will be responsible for either developing its own committee members that work directly with the chair on a particular topic OR they will appoint subcommittee chairs who will each then develop their own committee members. It’s a common structure and very useful for achieving goals. In an all-volunteer organization, the committees are especially important because they become the backbone of the entire organization. Without paid staff to ensure that programs and services are carried out, it falls entirely on committed volunteers. One-man committees just don’t have enough structure to carry out significant activities; one person just can’t do it all. Not only can the one person become overburdened, they can become burned out and apathetic, not able to contribute significantly to the growth of the organization. One-man committees also prevent the new ideas and growth you would see through a more democratic process that allows broader representation of the needs and wants of the members at large. Not having broader representation of the members-at-large can cause the public benefit organization to be easily led or swayed by individuals in a direction that serves personal benefits instead of “public” benefits.

Membership Musical Chairs - Continued

Action Plan

- 1** **Decide to take action.** Look internally for the solution; don't blame it on the economy or "wait it out."
- 2** **Pull together an ad hoc committee** of current AND past members to help evaluate the problems.
- 3** **Establish term limits** for board members and committee chairs in any position and include "break" periods between assignments.
- 4** **Establish a committee policy and procedures guide** that ensures committees stay focused with guidelines for setting up proper committee structures, establishing goals and objectives, setting regular meeting times and reporting progress.
- 5** **Archive all work** done by the board and its committees so the next round of people know what worked and what didn't work in the past.
- 6** **Contact all former members** and conduct an informal focus group to get REAL feedback. Make it in-person, fun and offer incentives to both attend and join.
- 7** **Establish an actual annual membership drive** that is set in stone, same time every year with the associated current-year committee responsible for theme and planning.
- 8** **Revamp your website** to focus on member recruitment on the main page and create a members-only login area with content that is interesting enough to get members to log in often.
- 9** **Make sure you have the technology infrastructure** in place to manage your member database and create regular automated communications specific to member's needs.
- 10** **Scale back on some activities and events** until your infrastructure is completely in place; you'll be far better equipped to handle these activities when your membership numbers are up.

Great Idea



Base Camp is a great online project management tool that allows people to work together on specific projects all by logging into an online account. This would be a great tool for membership committees; the board sets up each committee as a "project", then sets up the committee members as "users" - users can then log in and view only their own committee projects.

Each committee can set up to-do lists, milestones, upload and store documents and use a "whiteboard" to collaboratively view and edit important "works-in-progress". Not only does it help committees get more organized, it archives all important committee documents.

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