Leading a National Association Through Change

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Nonprofit organizations seem slower than their for-profit counterparts to adapt swiftly and keenly to the external evolving economic and technological environments around them. This is due primarily to restricted or scarce resources, little to no funds for research and development, and a small workforce. Leaders of nonprofit organizations also have many stakeholders to contend with and personality types that tend to span wider than traditional companies and each with a differing view of change. Adding more difficulty, incoming executives must work cautiously, yet strategically to reshape and modify the programs already operating with a fiercely loyal staff, a precarious donor pool, vulnerable volunteers, and a well meaning Board of Directors whose logistics and operations may need dusting off. Juggling this while maintaining sharp awareness of their public perception, ethical responsibility, fiduciary accountability, and preserving the organization’s rich history is a formidable task.

In my current pursuit to become the new executive director of a national nonprofit association, as the internal change agent, I could face these exciting challenges and opportunities during my time in the position to initiate unprecedented, organizational-wide change. Beginning with the development of self-learning goals and relationship building, I will be prepared to lead the group to formulate a realistic and meaningful strategic plan. I anticipate that through such deliberate efforts, I can bring about communication and professionalism, major technological advancement, national branding, corporate partnerships, funding opportunities, increased memberships and services, and a consistent management expertise that catapults this association to the next stage of its current development.

The National Association of Hospital Hospitality Houses, Inc. (NAH HH) is a twenty-five year-old nonprofit organization started by a dedicated group of volunteers that serves and
supports hospital hospitality houses in three countries. Members of this moderately-sized association include Ronald McDonald Houses, American Cancer Society Hope Lodges, Fisher Houses on military bases and other independent grassroots hospitality houses situated near major medical centers. Each member’s mission statement is essentially the same: to provide affordable lodging and emotional support for families whose loved one is receiving medical treatment at a nearby hospital. The NAHHH started as a membership group of fifteen hospital hospitality houses and has grown in a quarter decade to over 150 members. While its veteran members hold strong emotional attachments to the association, the organization is in need of several major overhauls and, in doing so, will have the capability to build its membership base to exceed 500.

Initially, I conducted a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis to determine where the NAHHH is positioned today. It holds strengths in many areas: devoted members, 25 years of service, a niche market, and the only resource for emerging hospitality houses. Its weaknesses are a retiring executive director, a geographically diverse Board of Directors, and a small budget with even smaller reserves. Opportunities for change and growth are plentiful as outlined above in my desired outcomes, and threats posed tend to be more external in nature, such as general fundraising in a rocky economic climate and economic repercussions resulting in members unable to justify their renewals. By identifying the need for initial changes and creating a sense of urgency, I hope to rapidly engage the Board of Directors in an attentive process to implement program changes that prove our worth to current members and show potential members the multitude of benefits they cannot do without: in theory, to defeat the real possibility of temporary or permanent membership reductions.

The transition of nonprofit leaders is a daunting process. Ensuring that the current, devoted executive director retires with respect and courtesy is of utmost importance because it
will have an effect over the membership as a whole. The Board of Directors, her colleagues, the members, and her own donors will be watching me carefully to assure that I appropriately recognize her contributions to the organization in the midst of necessary change. Robert Clay, Executive Director of the National Economic Development and Law Center, echoed my thoughts about the executive transition process after their long-time executive had left. During Clay’s final interview with the Board of Directors he said to them, “If you’re not willing to have someone come in and change things then I’m not the right person” (Adams, 2005, p. 14). It was not that Clay was unwilling to acknowledge and utilize the lessons learned from his predecessor; in fact, he understood, as do I, that an organization at such a pivotal period would recognize their window of opportunity for change and seize the moment to do so. As Ivancevich et al. (2007) illustrated, “Management and all those involved must have high and visible commitment to the effort” (p. 87). Fortunately, about six months ago, the Board of Directors announced the planned 2009 retirement of its executive director and the prospective hire of a change agent, emphasizing its hope to find a candidate from inside the membership pool. This was the beginning of the directors’ public communication for real change, and they have done an outstanding job of keeping the membership updated on their progress, which reinforces their desires to transform themselves and could make my initial job a bit easier.

Modeling the sensible “Leading Change” system flow (Ivancevich et al., 2007, p. 40) and after establishing the need for change and a sense of urgency within the NAHHH association, I will build a multi-generational, multi-disciplinary team comprising the core board members and a select group of members who have a passion for guiding the change movement. Working with any Board of Directors is a difficult undertaking, and the relentless task of pleasing many masters can be challenging. However, I plan to make this diverse board work
more cohesively by assisting the directors through the strategic planning process and ensuring that each director is responsible for key items and meeting plan deadlines. I will also make certain the members understand the job duties of an executive director and that they help me establish and hold accountable personal goals that align with the strategic plan. The team and I would be responsible for the development of a strategic plan that outlines goals in the following sample areas: (a) identify innovative and comprehensive ways of meeting member needs; (b) strive for the highest level of quality and service; (c) grow existing and cultivate new sources of funding; (d) place an emphasis on enhancing relationships with staff, volunteers, members, directors, and the local and national communities. Once the plan is approved and contains measurable objectives, the president and I will present it to the core group first for feedback and ultimately to the whole membership during the annual meeting in September 2009. Smaller focus groups will be held immediately after to engage the members more directly and encourage their support and participation.

Although the change process requires a systematic approach to acquire more global acceptance of changes, I intend to spend the first ninety days in the position learning more about the organization and its members, beyond my existing knowledge. In addition to conversing with elder members and advisers to gather historical, relevant information about the association, I will spend considerable time with the board members to better understand their level of interest and hopefully garner their personal support by determining our mutual roles and openly discussing their expectations of me as their new executive. I am also curious to learn their fears in order to prepare myself for possible unknown issues. Simultaneously, and for similar reasons, I will spend valuable time making personal contact with all of the members to become familiar with their reasons for membership, specific desires for the association and their feelings of upward
movement and growth. I will also ask the tough question about their financial ability to renew their membership. I will employ a volunteer intern to assist with a probative evaluation tool that will help measure the association’s current services and compile data to present at the Board of Directors meeting for consideration. By acquiring this data, I will be better positioned to qualify and quantify the need for organizational change before membership drops.

Over the past ten years, membership within the NAHHH has been steady; however, the goal to attract 200 members in 2000 was never achieved. Part of my initial time on the job will be analyzing old membership reports and personally following up with fallen members to inquire about their reasons for non-renewal. To gain approval for changes from the Board of Directors, I must show hard evidence that supports the need to modify current recruiting techniques and update our technology software to accommodate the more savvy members. Possessing direct feedback will assist us in setting and achieving realistic membership goals and enhancing our services to members. Allowing the members access to all of the collected data will be critical for progress to commence.

Fortunately, communication to the membership has significantly increased over the past three years. With exceptional involvement from the current president, the Board of Directors has elevated the association to a place of communication professionalism the national office has been unable to provide. Information sharing has increased dramatically and members enjoy sharing best practices and resources in rapid, electronic fashion. To further enhance benefits and communication, I would redesign and retool the existing website to offer members the ability to electronically receive room requests in both English and Spanish, receive donations from guest families and national donors; link directly to their own websites, create blogs for the exchange of information, list members and their years of membership on the homepage of the website, and
utilize shopping portals for discounted house and office supplies. While technological advancement is necessary, branding the association on a national level is essential. If done correctly, the organization can reap many benefits like national corporate partnerships that offer relevant services to our members. Combining the talents and services of companies, such as human resource consultants, health and property insurance, retirement and wealth management public relation and design, legal and risk management, and replacement reserve specialists, can complement the services currently offered and can create a new cash flow the NAHHH does not currently have. Additionally, we would be strong participants in national media outreach and speaking engagements, and I would gather data for national articles. Desired outcomes of this branding and media campaign would be increased membership and donations to support the programs. Making sure these achievements are communicated consistently to the members solidifies their need for membership and affiliation with success, confirms the need for further change, and garners support for future association advancement, which, in turn, can build trust and respect for my leadership ability and support an organization-wide cultural change for constant improvement (Ivancevich et al., 2007, p. 36).

It would be naive of me to believe that I would be free from individual and organizational resistance to some or all of these suggested changes, no matter how exciting they seemed. Holding steadfast to the newly designed goals of the organization, I would follow psychologist Kurt Lewin’s method of managing resistance by attempting to unfreeze the NAHHH’s current beliefs that the organization is running at maximum effectiveness and demonstrating new methods of management and operations and adding benefits; thus, this would move toward introducing the vision and making incremental and larger changes toward a new culture of
operations. Finally, refreezing the new techniques and processes would encourage creativity and forward thinking. (Ivancevich et al., 2007, p. 36).

Organizational development is defined as, “a normative reeducation strategy intended to function systems of beliefs, values and attitudes within the organization so that it can adapt better to the accelerated rate of change in technology, in our industrial environment, and in society in general” (Ivancevich et al., 2007, p. 64). The NAHHH has had no real need for urgency or competitiveness because the organization is the only current resource for hospitality houses. Although there is no eminent threat of another surfacing, the association has not benchmarked itself against any other program or executive. Therefore, it has created its own structural inertia about seeking change (Ivancevich et al., p. 69). By addressing organizational redevelopment and joining a recognized national association, I will be able to match our association against others to demonstrate how our peers are operating more effectively through a change process, to better determine where our growth strategies could be, and to gather resources crucial to the association’s vitality, all without incurring excessive association expense.

Resistance from some board and house members will be unavoidable. To mitigate these anticipated conditions and develop simpatico and commonality, I will first convey to the group my passion, extensive leadership, and visionary background in the hospitality house industry, as well as my successful ability to manage nonprofit organizations from the ground up. In her article, “The Future of Leadership in the Nonprofit Sector,” Linnell (n.d.) reported, “The nonprofit sector currently requires leaders who can both develop organizations rooted in the experience of the people for who the organization exists and in the community and social systems that affect them.” I am hopeful that with my credentials, my open desire to lead a “learning organization” that is adaptable and consistently proactively evolving, my vision for the
NAH HH, and my dedication to results, I will be able to persuade these members on the
importance of our next steps (Axelrod, 2002, p. 64).

Taking time to understand the nature of the organization’s current mode of operations
and subculture, coupled with the purposeful generation of a well-designed and well-
communicated strategic plan are some of the tools useful for conducting change within the
NAH HH. To ensure that cultural, programmatic, managerial, operational, and technological
aspects move forward, I will follow the carefully outlined series of steps to ensure the association
finally grows and stands tall.
References


