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The Board-CEO Change Leadership Team

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Here are three stories of associations that have successfully made significant changes:

Merging resources. In April 2001, the American Economic Development Council and the Council for Urban Economic Development merged, creating the International Economic Development Council. AEDC and CUED had been operating concurrently for decades, serving different constituencies in the economic development community. However, by the late 90s, the two associations were increasingly overlapping in terms of missions and membership. Recognizing that consolidating resources would make good economic sense, the AEDC and CUED chairs agreed to launch the merger initiative, which took about six months to complete. IEDC is now a bigger, stronger, nimbler, and much more influential association.

Improved governance. In March 2011 the boards of the International and American Associations for Dental Research unanimously agreed to take several major steps to strengthen governance of the two associations. Most significantly, the IADR and AADR boards decided to establish a new structure of four standing committees for each board corresponding to the broad streams of governing decisions and judgments the boards regularly made. The two boards also decided to disengage board members from involvement in the traditional structure of "silo" committees having little to do with governing. The IADR/AADR "High-Impact Governing Initiative" has yielded much more productive board meetings, more effective management of high-stakes issues, and board member feelings of ownership and satisfaction.

Enhanced volunteer engagement. In 2008, the board of directors of the American Association of Diabetes Educators replaced its traditional local chapter structure with a more fluid volunteer-involvement structure consisting of statewide coordinating bodies and communities of members organized by location, interest, discipline, or task. This high-stakes, technically and politically complex change initiative was spearheaded by a board-established volunteer/staff task force that analyzed the existing chapter model, mapped out the key elements of the new volunteer involvement structure, and oversaw its implementation over a period of approximately 18 months. The results have been impressive, not only in terms of more meaningful and active volunteer involvement and higher value for members, but also AADE membership growth despite the economic downturn.

These three associations, along with many others I've worked with over the years, recognize that standing pat isn't a viable course of action in today's rapidly changing world. Letting your association become the victim, rather than the driver, of change can come at a high cost in terms of declining membership, shrinking revenues, and a tarnished brand.

Out-of-the-Box Change

The change initiatives that IEDC, IADR/AADR, and AADE successfully implemented went well beyond incremental tweaking and could not have emerged from the three associations' mainstream operational planning and budgeting processes. IEDC, IADR/AADR, and AADE have succeeded at leading and managing what I call "out of the box" change. Three primary traits characterize out-of-the-box change:

- ✿ It involves high stakes, meaning that the anticipated cost of not implementing it will be steep, and often prohibitive, in terms of either unrealized benefits (e.g., not attracting potential new members or customers) or direct penalties (e.g., revenue decline).
- ✿ It is tremendously complex technically or politically, meaning that it requires strong leadership and meticulous management.
- ✿ It is extremely vulnerable, for two primary reasons: the absence of built-in change champions because it doesn't have an existing organizational home (program, department, function), and the normal human resistance to changing in significant ways.

How did IEDC, IADR/AADR, and AADE do it? Two factors have proved to be most effective. First is the strong, sustained leadership of an association CEO who enthusiastically embraces the "Innovator-in-Chief" role. Second is active engagement of the association governing board, working closely with the CEO as an integral part of what I call the "Change Leadership Team."

IEDC President and CEO Jeff Finkle, IADR/AADR Executive Director Chris Fox, and AADE then-President & CEO Lana Vukovljak provided hands-on, highly visible, time-intensive leadership, wearing two important hats: Chief Process Designer and Chief Change Champion.

Being [Chief Process Designer](#) doesn't mean the CEO maps out every last detail of the change planning and management process, but it does mean that the CEO pays very close attention to the details, makes the decisions required to firmly establish the change planning and management process, and keeps tabs on the process to make sure it is working properly.

In the Chief Change Champion role, Finkle, Fox, and Vukovljak overcame resistance to significant change in their associations through education and motivation. One way to combat fear of change is making sure all participants understand why their association needs to devote significant time to leading and managing out-of-the-box change, primarily by explaining how their association will benefit from fashioning and implementing change initiatives (e.g., generating new revenues critical to survival). Another way is to ensure that everyone involved in the change process understands the specific steps they will be going through (for example, participating in a retreat or serving on a task force), how much time they will likely be spending, and the schedule they will be following.

The three CEOs motivated board and staff members by harking back to the association's core values and reflecting on the association's long-range vision. Core values (for example, "the financial health of our member companies") are the association's most cherished beliefs and principles. Long-range vision is a detailed picture of the desired association over the long run (for example, "We will be the preeminent educational resource for members of our profession"). If the core values statement and vision statement are either outdated or completely absent, one of the CEO's roles is to make sure they are created or updated before the change process moves forward. This is why Fox and Vukovljak engaged their board and executive team members in values clarification and vision development in a retreat setting to kick off their change planning efforts.

Board Ownership

CEOs who are highly effective Innovators-in-Chief tend to be board-savvy as well. The primary fuel that powers commitment is ownership, and the primary way a CEO can foster board ownership of change is through active, meaningful engagement early in the process, when it is still possible for the board to make a significant difference. You'll never see a board-savvy Innovator-in-Chief sending a finished change initiative to the board for review and approval that the board hasn't already helped to shape well before the initiative was fleshed out.

IEDC, IADR/AADR, and AADE employed a variety of practical mechanisms for board engagement aimed at transforming board members into owners and ardent change champions, including

- ✿ holding daylong board-executive team brainstorming retreats as vehicles for updating values and vision, scanning external conditions and trends, identifying and assessing high-stakes issues, and exploring possible change initiatives
- ✿ involving selected board members in ad hoc bodies, such as the IEDC merger task force, another way of building board ownership in change, provided that the whole board is afforded the opportunity to provide direction and feedback periodically as the ad hoc body does its work
- ✿ establishing a standing board planning committee that on an ongoing basis reaches agreement with the CEO on updates to the change-planning and management process and oversees implementation of the process.

Out-of-the-box change goes well beyond this brief article, but if your association aspires to capitalize on opportunities to grow and counter serious threats, you must lay a foundation: a CEO actively playing the Innovator-in-Chief role and a board actively engaged as integral part of the Change Leadership Team. With the foundation in place, you're already 75 yards down the field and have the luxury of focusing on finer touches.

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