

IADR/AADR Case Study: Leading Out-of-the-Box Change

BY CHRISTOPHER FOX AND DOUG EADIE

March 19, 2011, was a dramatic turning point in the history of the International and American Associations for Dental Research — and a giant step forward in the governance of the two associations. Meeting jointly in San Diego, the IADR and AADR boards of directors unanimously decided to take steps to strengthen their governing performance. Most importantly, the two boards voted to establish a new structure of four standing committees for each board corresponding to the broad streams of governing decisions and judgments that effective association governing boards regularly make: Board Operations; Member/Stakeholder Relations; Performance Monitoring/Audit; and Strategic and Operational Planning.

The IADR and AADR boards also agreed to disengage board members from involvement in the existing, highly traditional structure of “silo” committees having more to do with technical advisory work than governing; for example, such committees as the annual session, publications, science information and fellowships. The boards concurred that the important non-governing work of these existing committees would continue, but would be populated by senior-level, non-board volunteers with oversight from the new standing committees.

Powerful ROI

In the 18 months since the associations implemented the new governing structure, the boards realized a powerful return on the investment of time, energy and money:

- The regular business meetings of the boards have become more productive and time-effective because of the four standing committees’ preparatory work.
- The boards have a firmer grasp of the strategic issues demanding their attention. For example, IADR was able to

develop a specific research agenda within a few months rather than an estimated three years. And AADR was able to factor key insights from its Council into its strategic decision making, rather than treating Council input as a traditional “rubber stamp” exercise.

- Board members in both associations find their governing work more satisfying and feel stronger ownership of the governing decisions they make, while the two associations also have benefitted from the active involvement of non-board volunteers in the technical advisory committees that have developed new approaches to carrying out their charges.

Defying the Odds

Getting board members to embrace a new standing committee structure is, indeed, an out-of-the-box change initiative. The initiative was highly complex, both technically and politically. Moving from the traditional silo committee structure to true board governing committees could not possibly have been effectively handled as a business-as-usual operational planning issue. Well-intentioned change initiatives all too often bite the dust because of the familiarity and comfort people feel with established practices and the fear that often grips people when faced with significant change. Three factors enabled IADR and AADR to defy the odds and establish a dramatically new committee structure for both boards:

1. Early, intensive involvement of board members in the change process;
2. Reliance on board “change champions” to convince their peers to take action; and
3. Careful management of the implementation process.

Early Board Involvement

The IADR and AADR board chairs and executive director recognized that early, intensive board member involvement would be critical to bringing off significant governance change. Hiring a consultant to come up with change recommendations and then attempt to sell them to the boards would never fly, primarily because it would fail to generate the board member ownership and commitment necessary to overcome normal resistance to major change. Accordingly, they took three steps in fall 2010 to ensure successful governance reform: 1) scheduled a daylong retreat or “strategic work session” in December 2010, involving all IADR/AADR board members and the executive team; 2) established an Ad Hoc Strategic Work Session Design Committee consisting of several IADR and AADR board members to design the December retreat; and 3) retained outside assistance in designing, facilitating and following through on the retreat.

The ad hoc committee lent tremendous credibility to the change process. Co-chaired by the IADR and AADR presidents and consisting of seven other association officers, during a half-day session the committee established the December retreat’s objectives (e.g., “to familiarize ourselves with the key characteristics of high-impact association governing boards”); structure (e.g., the use of seven breakout groups led by board members to generate practical ways to strengthen the two boards’ governing capacity); and agenda. This information was then sent three weeks in advance to all retreat participants in a memorandum from all ad hoc committee members, the executive director and consultant, sending two very important signals to the participants: board members had taken the lead in designing the daylong event

and the meticulous design ensured that the retreat would be worth everyone's time and energy. Participants emerged from the retreat understanding the need for governance restructuring and how it might best be accomplished. A solid foundation for governance change had been laid.

Board Change Champions


Following the retreat, the ad hoc committee members acted as highly visible change champions by taking the lead in presenting the recommended new standing committee structure to the two boards in March 2011.

Implementation Management

The third critical factor was close attention to the implementation of the new

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committee structure. The IADR and AADR board chairs appointed a new body consisting of members from both boards — the High-Impact Governing Program Steering Committee — to oversee the implementation of the new committee structure, including phasing board members out of the technical advisory committees. The executive team supplied the Steering Committee with a detailed, 16-page implementation plan. Taking this final step ensured the success of the new board standing committees, demonstrating that out-of-the box governance change can be successfully accomplished in relatively brief time when board members are: meaningfully involved early in

the change process, take the lead in securing their peers' approval of governance change and remain intensively involved in implementing the changes. 

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