

Impact of Planning on Increasing Member Involvement

Overview

A regional volunteer-driven chapter/component affiliated with a large state organization had been experiencing a decline in volunteerism. Being fully dependent on volunteers, this trend was jeopardizing the organization's existence. After conducting interviews with current volunteer leaders it was apparent that the desire to contribute was present, but most were ignorant of the required tasks. The group had little in the way of documentation to guide volunteers from one year to the next. What had once been prepared had been misplaced over time. As a result, a few key leaders of the organization would assume the majority of the duties required to operate this group. It was no surprise that these key leaders were becoming disillusioned and burned-out. In order to break the pattern, the group agreed to develop at least an annual plan, practical in nature and focused on delivering the support considered most critical to members (e.g. monthly meetings, printed communication, key trade exhibition, etc.).

Findings

This approach generated the following results:

Involvement leads to commitment.

Those participating in the session, who were previously inactive, began selecting those activities and tasks that they felt they could support. They offered to assume these tasks without a prompt.

Group cohesion has a direct influence on the organization's culture.

The group's attitude improved during the course of this effort. The mood at the beginning would best be defined as somber, willing to accept that "members" no longer cared to become active in the organization. At the end of the planning effort, the mood was optimistic yet realistic. They recognized the challenges of making the organization relevant in their members' lives but believed the actions outlined in the plan would contribute to their success.

What Can Be Learned?

Considerations for Application

What tools does my organization provide to its volunteer and staff leaders at the chapter or component level?

It's dangerous to operate under an assumption that these groups should know what's needed to operate. While they may hold tremendous expertise in their own profession, trade or special interest, they have little expertise in organizational development and group process. And when it comes to planning, most are prone to "do what we did last year." Or identify several atomistic problems along with a host of tactical solutions; most of which might not deal with the real root of the problems faced by the organization.

These factors are cross-cutting and affect the success of any membership-based organization. The more tools these volunteer and staff leaders have, designed for immediate and practical use, the more willing and able these members will be to assume various roles and fulfill specific tasks. And the more attention is given to assisting in the implementation or developing their ability to conduct sessions of this kind, the greater chance the action will become institutionalized in the organization to produce productive outcomes.

In what ways does my organization communicate with these groups to ensure they remain aware of the support available?

One of the greatest assumptions made in the association community is that members and staff remember all the programs, products and services available. It would be more productive to operate on the assumption that any communication of this information is soon forgotten, unless it is immediately used. Organizations with smaller components need to maximize current communication mediums as a way to solicit input and gain awareness of each group's specific needs and issues.

Contact Melos for reprint permission and for more information about planning techniques and tools that can be used with your components or chapters to increase involvement.

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