



2012 Research Initiative: Restoring Purposeful Pathways through Member Engagement

The Need

Membership-based organizations (MBOs) are distinctive from other nonprofit and for-profit organizations in their purpose, scope and operation. They depend upon their members to contribute their knowledge and expertise to help develop the programs, products and services consumed by the entire member universe. They also exist to help members make connections and build meaningful relationships with others to facilitate the sharing and exchanging of information and knowledge. Understanding the dimensions and dynamics that foster and shape this kind of member engagement has remained elusive for decades.

At present, no standard definition exists within the association management community for member engagement; or a means for its measurement.

To address this long-standing challenge, it is believed that a more sophisticated systemic understanding of member engagement (building, shaping, sustaining, etc.) is required. This proposal mobilizes a multi-disciplinary team of professionals across generations to address the immediate need of discovering what works, but also developing an evidenced-based model that can produce productive outcomes for decades to come.

Project Goals

- Become more knowledgeable about the dynamics and dimensions that influence member engagement in MBOs.
- Be able to understand the organizational infrastructure necessary to create highly-engaged membership communities.

Objectives

- Define member engagement/involvement including operational measures specific to MBOs.
- Establish a baseline of the values, processes, and practices within MBOs that currently influence and generate an engaged membership.
- Develop a generic operational model (that aligns proven practices with relevant theories) for use as a guide by MBOs at all levels of complexity.
- Develop an assessment tool for MBOs to determine their organization's level of proclivity to support a high degree of member engagement.

Research Audience *(subject to adaptation)*

- 2012: MBO executive and staff professionals.
- 2013: Members of MBOs.

Methodology

An advisory group (representing association professionals, volunteer leaders, university scholars, and content specialists) will guide the project. Interested individuals are invited to monitor and offer input at various stages.

The project will:

1. employ both *qualitative and possibly quantitative research methods* to solicit information and conduct analysis;
2. follow the general principles of *appreciative inquiry*; and
3. employ *inductive reasoning* to identify the patterns and trends for a viable model that builds and shapes member engagement.

The findings will also be analyzed against two existing models (previously developed by the Melos Institute):

- Relation-centered Management Model
- Community Development

The purpose in doing so is to help define and contribute the principles, processes, and practices that best facilitate a highly engaged membership community to a more comprehensive principles-based, systems-oriented body of knowledge.

Research Design: Key Stages *(subject to adaptation)*

A. Confirm Core Dimensions

Research Method: Semi-structured Interviews via Special Invitation

Conduct a series of semi-structured onsite/online group interviews to affirm, adjust and/or replace current/anticipated assumptions surrounding the dimensions of member engagement in MBOs.

Review existing literature.

B. Solicit Opinion, Perspective, and Examples

Research Method: Open Community Forum

Facilitate a guided discussion to solicit the input from association professionals on the following:

1. Tangible and intangible characteristics of member engagement (help shape definition);
2. Current means for measurement;
3. Actions that have proven successful;
4. Effectiveness of actions pursued;
5. Specific examples/models most productive; and
6. Key questions that persist.

C. Identify Patterns and Trends

Research Method: Semi-structured/Structured Interviews

Conduct a major outreach effort, drawing upon information generated from the community forum and other social network connections.

Seek to identify candidates who possess productive actions/models for member engagement.

Conduct structured and semi-structured personal interviews with candidates to generate accounts that can be converted into references for others.

Analyze the accounts using the Melos Institute's universal principles to establish pattern and trends.

D. Design Model, Assess Alignment, Report Findings

Research Method: Hypothesis Construction/ Inductive Reasoning/Comparative Analysis

Draw upon the findings to build a generic model, including a relevant set of principles, designed to support MBOs at all levels of complexity.

Assess possible alignment with two existing Melos Institute models (relation-centered management and community development) to determine possible alignment of existing principles, processes and practices.

Further analyze information, publish findings electronically and in print, share knowledge and implications through a specially-planned onsite (a national forum) and complementary electronic events.

E. Application

Research Method: Prototype Testing

Convert findings into an assessment tool(s) that can be used to evaluate the organization's ability to support member engagement.

Test the prototype tool with willing MBOs to ensure design effectiveness.

Provide tool at a reasonable cost.

Evaluation and Next Steps

Project participants are invited to evaluate various aspects of the research design, findings, and key events.

Findings are used to guide further efforts for research in this area for the 2013 Initiative.

For more information, contact the Melos Institute: 650.355.0494