



leadership insights

EMPOWERING LEADERS TO EXCEL

Supporters and Challengers

The Leadership Challenge

When an association develops its strategic plan, some of the activities that have become an integral part of the association's culture may no longer be suitable based on the association's current mission and the needs of its members in today's environment. Staff and volunteer leaders often struggle with the challenge of how to address the feelings of the volunteers who are passionately connected to these activities.

While considering the impact of these decisions on volunteers is an important part of implementing a change, it should never discourage an association from letting go of the past in order to better serve its members moving forward. I frequently hear from staff and volunteer leaders that when an association decides to no longer resource an activity that has become a favorite of a small group of volunteers that these volunteers occasionally mount an active campaign to ensure the proposed change doesn't occur. Since this type of response can prevent the implementation of worthwhile change, it's necessary to address how to deal with this situation.

Identifying The Players

My experience as a REALTOR® volunteer has taught me that most association volunteers are willing to do whatever is needed of them, as these individuals—whom I refer to as “*supporters*”—are focused on serving the members of the association.

However, on occasion, some volunteers—whom I refer to as “*challengers*”—resist any attempt by leadership to change or do away with an activity to which they are partial. These individuals do whatever is necessary to interfere with the implementation of decisions made by their association with which they don't agree.

Supporters:

While supporters do not always agree with the change that is being proposed, they will usually understand and respect the process used to arrive at the decision.

- *Supporters understand that staff and volunteer leaders must consider the entire membership when making decisions and not just the interests of a select few.*
- *They also accept that the environment in which the association exists is ever changing and that the association must be able to recognize when change is required and adjust accordingly.*

Challengers:

There are a number of factors that can cause a challenger to react in a negative fashion to an association's decision.

- *The volunteer may receive a high level of satisfaction from working on a specific activity*
- *The activity may provide the volunteer a certain degree of prestige and a corresponding sense of importance in the association*
- *It may be that the volunteer was part of the original decision-making team that created the activity and truly believes that doing away with it will harm the association.*

Regardless of their motivation, challengers are not working in the best interest of the association because they will do whatever is necessary to ensure that a proposed change does not occur.

Addressing The Challenge

Now that we have identified the players, let's examine the best way to handle this leadership challenge. Whenever a meaningful change is being proposed, it's essential that an implementation plan be developed.

- It should address how the announcement will be made, specifically identifying who (**messenger**) will make the announcement—president, association executive, past president, etc.
- How the information will be conveyed (**medium**) to the volunteers—meeting, email, letter, etc.
- What exactly will be told to the volunteers regarding this change (**message**).

One mistake frequently made when announcing a change is that staff and volunteer leaders forget that most volunteers were not privy to all the many months of discussions leading to the decision to implement the change. *It is imperative that volunteers be informed of this process.*

Knowing that the possibility exists that some volunteers may be unhappy with the change, this group should be invited to meet with a member of the staff/leadership team as part of the announcement plan. They are not being treated differently because they are special but because they will be the ones impacted most by the decision.

This meeting should explain the process that was used to study the issue, the facts that were considered and the benefits that will be derived. The meeting should allow for an open exchange of feelings and concerns, both positive and negative. The staff/leadership team member running this meeting should explain how helpful it will be if the members of this group support the change when it is announced.

Once this meeting is held and the announcement is made to the general membership, association leadership should deal on an individual basis with the challengers, if there are any. It's often best to address a challenger in a nonthreatening manner through individual meetings to discuss his/her concerns and to once again solicit the individual's support. It's possible that some challengers may never become supporters. That's something that must be accepted whenever change is being proposed.

While a volunteer who is working in opposition to a change may be emotionally upset for any of the aforementioned reasons, it's important that he/she feels as if the staff/leadership respects him/her enough to listen to his/her concerns and solicit his/her support.



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