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Association Leadership in the New Economy: Recruit. Empower. Celebrate.

by Andy Masters, MA, CSP

With membership challenges, budget challenges, and being forced to “*do more with less*”, today’s new economy has become one of the most difficult for association leaders. Executive Directors and their staff have too often found themselves “*stuck in the trenches*”, engulfed with handling projects, events, and day-to-day operations. Negative impacts include stress, burnout, and mistakes—but also valuable time taken away from visionary projects, long-term planning, and innovation to help create additional value to its’ members, industry, and community.

But, alas—there is a magic trick possible: Association leaders who can change Board culture, empower their Board, and master the “Art of Delegation” to their Board (and staff) can embrace proactive projects, innovation, and long-term planning. In other words, creating an environment to allow association leaders to truly lead under less stress—as opposed to swimming in “survival management”.

Here are a few ways to make this amazing positive change occur:

Change the Culture of Your Board or Executive Committee:

When working with associations, I witness association leaders apprehensive to “*dump more responsibility on Board volunteers who are already busy.*” Often, there is a purveying mindset to overcome, which is “*We are volunteers, and you are paid staff*”. This mindset creates a relationship of dependency—the opposite of empowering. Are you enabling and perpetuating this relationship, or taking action to shift towards empowering?

Association leaders cannot live in fear of “*dumping more on your Board*”. Do not be afraid to challenge your Board to do great things!

The first step in changing Board CULTURE is changing the *expectations* and *responsibility* with a NEW Board. It is very difficult to change mid-stream, if not unfair. So, let’s plan ahead for the next year or term to make this shift happen.

*You must first be the invisible hand in successfully nudging
(RECRUITING) talented people to serve on the Board
—and in the right positions!*

This is the key area you *do* want to impose your will (*behind the scenes*) to make an investment in future Board success. GET talented people. EMPOWER those talented people. And, enjoy the ride.

To truly create an empowered Board of those talented people, you must be willing to give your Board autonomy, latitude, and decision-making ability. This creates the mindset that it is “*their Association*”, not “*your Association*”. This will spark a greater spirit of having “*pride in your work*”!

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Have the Board create **THEIR** goals, **THEIR** creative ideas, and **THEIR** disbursement of responsibilities. This will trigger a much greater response than placing a “To-Do” list onto your Board. This will **EMPOWER** the Board to embrace their plans and ideas, which will result in greater action—and less “prodding”. Let them change the conference format. Be flexible to change membership benefits. Be truly open to giving the Board decision-making power. Selfless and empowering leaders foster this trusting environment—that’s what you want!

The phrase “*This is Your Baby*” can be powerful and empowering—which can be uttered in a supportive and enthusiastic manner to each Board member—either during a meeting, or in private. These are words of support and encouragement—but stated with an underlying challenging of one’s pride. No one wants to fail, and everyone wants to be a hero. They must understand that everyone is watching them to either achieve **GREAT** things in their position, or to fail—and accountability is on them.

Phrases to invoke pride, empowerment, and a challenge include:

- “*This is your baby!*”
- “*Membership grew by 12% under the previous Board. I’m excited to hear the brainstorm of THIS talented Board—could we hit 13%?*”
- “*Record attendance for this event was back in 2006. Let’s see how this Board can break it!*”

You can also tinker with Board position responsibilities. Sly changes could also include your website and communications directing issues to Board members rather than you or your staff, such as “*For questions about this initiative or event, contact president@yourassociation.com, or programs@yourassociation.com.*”

The goal is to *evolve your role into the “Invisible Hand” behind-the-scenes!* Learning how to tactfully “nudge” actions in the right direction can take conscious nurturing and real people skills. It also takes some biting your tongue at times, as well.

“Help Them Help You”: Train Your Board to Lead Volunteers.

You must help them help you. Hopefully, you host a “kick-off” retreat/orientation/event for your Board each term. During this event, allow time for them to be trained on empowerment and delegation. The old rule that “*80 percent of the work is done by 20% of the people*” will only run your Board Leaders into the ground. Your leaders must truly know how to empower, delegate, and lead a group of *volunteers*—so they can accomplish great things for your association, in turn allowing *you* to accomplish great things for your association.

“Do not assume that just because your Board members are also leaders in their organizations, that they also know how to lead a team of volunteers.”

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Empathize that you do understand each Board leader is BUSY, making it even more important to encourage Board Leaders not to possess a “*do everything themselves*” leadership mentality. Inspire them to first and foremost gain participation by recruiting, empowering, and delegating to other volunteers. A team of 25 can achieve so much more than a team of 5—with much less time and stress falling on the leader.

“A leader isn’t the person running around doing everything themselves. A leader is someone who inspires others to achieve the goals of the organization as a team.”

Master Delegation to Your Board and Staff:

Of course, some Association Executives only have one staff member. Some have hundreds. No matter the size, there is a great power in empowering and delegating to your staff, as well. Studies show employees are more engaged, have higher morale, and less turnover when they believe they are trusted, appreciated, and allowed to take on greater responsibility. Take pride in mentorship. Someone probably showed you the ropes at times during your career, as well.

“In order to truly be an empowering leader, you must also train YOURSELF to LET GO.”

If you get burned once from delegating to a staff member or a Board member, *do not* make that an excuse to STOP DELEGATING FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE. Here is a reality check: Will delegation ALWAYS work?...*No, it won’t!* However, what, perhaps, could you have done more effectively? Were you clear in exactly what was to be performed, and by when? Did the person have the time, training, and resources to perform the task? Was it the right person to delegate to? Did you follow-up before the deadline to double-check in case they got off track? Delegation is a learned process, and the organized “delegator” can greatly decrease the chances of getting burned—creating a powerful and confident cycle of wanting to delegate more.

3 Tips For Delegating to Either Your Board Leaders, or Your Staff:

1.) *“I know you’re really busy right now, so based on your schedule, when do you think you can get this done by?”* Instead of setting deadlines or imposing an order—ask someone when *they* can commit to getting the task done. First of all, they will appreciate the gesture. They know their schedule and other commitments better than you. But, if *they* are the ones who set their own deadline, there is an extra level of accountability—and are much more likely to adhere to the deadline.

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2.) *“Can you help me? I really need your help.”* The number one reason people don’t get enough help is because they don’t ASK. Period. If you sincerely need help, and sincerely ask someone using these magic words—nine times out of 10 they will respond.

3.) *“Thank You”*. It could easily be argued that acts of appreciation are even more important in the volunteer-world than the corporate world—and in the corporate world, it is one of the Top 3 complaints of all employees: *“I don’t feel appreciated in my job”*. Your Board members must truly understand the power of appreciation, recognition, and reciprocation in the volunteer world, for them to reach out to other volunteers for help.

“Perhaps most important, each member of your Board and staff must be a MASTER of providing volunteer appreciation and No-Cost/Low-Cost rewards!”

Lastly, a leader’s job is to evaluate all resources and opportunities available to perform the tasks of the Association—especially if your Board & Staff are drowning in administrative responsibilities. Wisely utilize your association management company, consider interns from a nearby college, evaluate technology upgrades which might streamline or automate processes, and uncover the endless (*and often inexpensive*) freelance solutions available on services such as Upwork or IVAA. Everyone will appreciate your creative actions to *“take the load off”*, enabling them to focus on their most important responsibilities, as well!

But most importantly, each day truly focus on incorporating the leadership style of empowering, developing, and delegating to your Board and staff—and *appreciating* constantly with each of their efforts. Then devote your time to your most important proactive and innovative projects which only you can do—so you can ultimately achieve MORE for your association, in less time, with higher quality, and less stress.

Besides, you deserve vacation days without your cell phone ringing every 10 minutes, and you will be amazed at what your association can accomplish when you trust and empower others.

About the Author: Andy Masters, MA, CSP, has written 5 books, earned 4 degrees, and presented hundreds of leadership, service, and time management programs across North America (NSA). Andy has earned the prestigious “CSP” award/designation of the National Speakers Association (NSA), the highest international recognition for professional speakers, in which less than 10% of over 5,000+ speakers worldwide have achieved. Visit www.Andy-Masters.com or email Andy@Andy-Masters.com for books or speaking availability.

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