

Managing change

A large nonprofit dove into social media and found that its organizational culture wasn't ready for the change (see [Adapting to Social Media](#), below). A nonprofit CEO decided to change his organization's business model and needed to convince two boards to switch roles (see [Reshaping Governance](#), below). Other nonprofits have found themselves unprepared for success (see [Unanticipated Growth](#), below), or for transitioning from a founder's leadership to a more mature organizational model (see [blog post on succession at http://bit.ly/SyPsuccession](http://bit.ly/SyPsuccession)). These are stories of major organizational change, told in brief below. What they shared was a need to manage change.

The missions of many nonprofits focus on pushing for social change or preparing people to adapt to the larger forces of change around them. Other nonprofits preserve and share a cultural heritage in the face of change.

Organizational change in its various forms, however, can be much less familiar and manageable. The need for it may be ignored or denied, the handling of it can be seriously disruptive, and the repercussions may be destructive.

Change management is a broad and diverse topic, but the essential issues can be framed in a cycle of change:

- Recognition of a need for change
- Definition of the change that is needed
- Development of a strategy to effect the change
- Implementation of the change
- Assessment of the effectiveness of the change

Recognition

Focused intently on mission, nonprofit staff and volunteers sometimes don't recognize:

- shifting conditions of needs or funding
- new opportunities for reframing operations for greater impact
- dysfunctions that are dragging them down

Even when a leader sees the need for change, it may still be a challenge to convey that need to others. The intensity of commitment to the cause, and a hesitance to challenge fundamental assumptions, can obscure problems until they become very serious, or even insurmountable (see [Critical Issues #9: Brand Identity](#) and the blog post [It it Ain't Broke... http://bit.ly/SyPcomplacency](http://bit.ly/SyPcomplacency)).

The best safeguard against the failure to recognize a need for change is a culture of strategic thinking, developed through a regular cycle of strategic, business and program planning. Organizations that value planning and use it often enough to foster ongoing strategic thinking are much more likely to expect change and stay alert to changes of all sorts.

Definition

Recognizing the need for change isn't the same thing as accurately determining the nature of the need or of the response. The most fundamental idea of nonprofit strategic planning is to involve all stakeholders in focusing on strategic issues and developing an informed consensus about how to address them. Their aggregate wisdom, knowledge and experience is more likely to identify changing circumstances than is a single leader or even a full governing board.

When a comprehensive strategic or business planning process is not practicable, individual planning tools can still be used effectively (benchmarking, [SWOT](#) [<http://bit.ly/SyPswot>] a [polarity exercise](#), [<http://bit.ly/SyPtension>]...) to explore and define issues and strategies for more immediate board or management action.

Strategy Development

A strategic plan connects mission through goals and objectives to mission-driven measurable actions (see [Critical Issues #5: The Structure of Planning](#), <http://bit.ly/SyPci05>). This conceptual structure fosters the rigorous thinking required to anticipate, create or face change. If necessary, this way of connecting a qualitative mission to quantifiable results can also be used independently from a full planning process to guide board or management in dealing quickly and effectively with urgent issues.

Ultimately, depending on the nature of the needed change, the strategy required may be less about planning, and more about helping people (staff, trustees and other volunteers, other constituents) to adapt to change. This takes us to the front lines of managing change, implementation.

Implementation

The implication of the title *Managing Change*, of course, is consideration of the issues of effecting change once it has been recognized and defined, and a plan has been developed.

Change is disruptive and uncomfortable to many stakeholders. It can require reevaluating assumptions, refocusing attention and restructuring responsibilities, power and prerogatives. Unless the process is managed effectively, some stakeholders will resist, criticize, complain, or just wait to see whether the initiative will fail so that they don't have to do things differently.

Change management is the art of helping people to adapt to change—staff who need to accept changes in their responsibilities, managers who need to develop different styles of leadership, a board that needs to take on a different role.

The keys to success in managing change are straightforward, and they are all, in one way or another, about communication:

Clarity: Presumably there is a compelling reason for making the change. The more clearly you communicate the benefits of the change along with the negative consequences of *not* changing, the more likely you will be to minimize resistance, criticism, and complaint, and to stimulate active cooperation.

Engagement: If one of the challenges of making the change is to assure staff cooperation (and that of other stakeholders), you can enhance the chances of success by involving them in planning for the change, designing and implementing it, and feeding back responses to it. If stakeholders feel that they are part of the initiative, they will be much more supportive of it.

Supervision: If staff are expected to do things differently, they may need training, encouragement and time to adapt. They will likely need to review current responsibilities with a supervisor to establish priorities for tasks that may be less important than the ones that will support the change. A regular review of progress and impediments will maintain focus and support success.

Leadership: Successful change is not about *you* or *them*, it's about *us*. Senior leaders in the organization should be sure to find a way to be visible participants in the changes being made, not just remote and exempt commanders. This focuses attention on the importance of the initiative(s) and enhances morale. It can also pre-empt or dampen political power plays and undercut cynics.

Transparency: Announcing an organizational change once—or even repeating it a few more times—does not convey a sufficient message of a structural or systemic change. Stakeholders need to have a sense of an interactive communication with the organization's leaders, including encouragement to comment and providing individual responses and regular updates on how the change is working and how it's being tweaked or improved as a result of feedback. Stakeholders need to know what successes are being achieved as the result of the change, and they need to be reminded about the importance of keeping on track.

Assessment

Any organizational change should be accompanied by clear, quantifiable measures of success, both as a management tool and as a communication tool. See [CI#8, The Measure of Success, http://bit.ly/SyPci08](http://bit.ly/SyPci08), for a discussion of metrics.

Change is inevitable, Awareness of it, and the ability to respond to it, are not. An understanding of the intricacies of organizational change supports relevance and sustainability.

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Planning for yourself?

We're happy to offer as much (or as little) advice or guidance as you need. Use our experience to assure your success.

Contact Sam Frank to discuss the possibilities.
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**Other Critical Issues**

- CI 1: *Why Plan?* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci01>)
- CI 2: *The Secret Life of Surveys* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci02>)
- CI 4: *On Boards* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci04>)
- CI 5: *The Structure of Planning* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci05>)
- CI 6: *Financial Modeling* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci06>)
- CI 7: *On Mission* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci07>)
- CI 8: *The Measure of Success* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci08>)
- CI 9: *Brand Identity* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci09>)
- CI 10: *Mind Your RFPs & Qs* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci10>)
- CI 11: *Integrated Planning* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci11>)
- CI 12: *Business Planning* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci12>)
- CI 13: *Facility Planning* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci13>)
- CI 15: *Strategic Action* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci15>)

Adapting to Social Media

Recognizing that its ability to maintain its leadership of the preservation movement required effective communication with the public, and that a younger public communicates in new ways, the National Trust for Historic Preservation transformed its website five years ago into PreservationNation.org, built on social media principles of open, interactive communications, allowing users to participate in the dialogue through blogs and other familiar social media tools. It is “a virtual town square where people share proven tools, make connections, and get inspired to save historic places.”

As a large, mature organization with a high proportion of long-serving staff and a membership highly tilted toward people of retirement age, the Trust knew it was taking a bold leap into unknown territory. Five years ago, when this change was made, no other organization of the size and maturity of the Trust had made this kind of commitment.

Synthesis Partnership was retained to advise on the change in organizational culture required to make the transformation successful. We engaged key stakeholders in an assessment process, helped to clarify goals and expectations, and recommended changes in internal processes that would reinforce the transformation. These latter included re-examining a hierarchical culture that inhibited the initiative-taking inherent in social media, changing internal procedures to model the interactive communications expected with members and the public, and redesigning the organization’s intranet to parallel the experience of the new website.

Reshaping Governance

The National Inventors Hall of Fame was initially created as museum-based institution with impact primarily on its local region as a science and technology resource and a tourist attraction. Driven by the vision of a new CEO, a decision was made to shift its primary attention to four operating subsidiaries that promote science and technology education and awareness nationwide, with a presence in 46 states.

To facilitate the transition, Synthesis Partnership helped NIHF to develop new approaches to management and governance more adapted to its changing situation and needs. The staff were fully invested in the transformation; the greatest challenge was to prepare a compelling and convincing case to present to two separate existing boards, whose roles and concerns would be affected dramatically. The existing fiduciary board, whose interests were focused more on local operations and the regional economy would be asked to transfer its fiduciary authority to the national board, which had served an advisory function.

The plan for change entailed:

- Shaping a new governance plan to optimize the effectiveness of the new boards.
- Creating an implementation plan for the boards to play more effective roles in supporting the needs of NIHF.
- Developing consensus for the governance plan among members of both expiring boards.
- Identifying and resolving impediments to a smooth transition.
- Channeling existing board members to new effective roles.

Unanticipated Growth

The New England Law Libraries Consortium (NELLCO) was founded as a regional resource-sharing group, but its success in developing service-enhancing and cost-saving features attracted the attention of libraries far beyond New England. The pressure for growth, in turn, challenged NELLCO’s core values of collegial interaction within a group that could meet and discuss issues as a board.

Synthesis Partnership was engaged by NELLCO to develop a growth plan encompassing alternative strategies, organizational development, and financial modeling. In facilitating board discussion of these issues we helped them to clarify their concerns and their options, and develop consensus on turning a challenge into an opportunity.