



Decision making at associations – Can an agreement be made or will it remain an ongoing discussion?

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Reaching an agreement or decision can be challenging. Why? Because it involves people. Think of a recent event in the world of sports. Two tennis finalists played the longest match in the history of Wimbledon. What was the breakthrough that made one the winner and not the other while the players were so similar in their game? Through clearing the mind, a tennis player can, process information from the match with greater accuracy.

The two major objectives are awareness and control. Awareness is being able to recognize an appropriate response to situations. Control is the ability to change in accordance to the awareness process. Through the development of these two abilities, a tennis player is able to respond to the fast-paced competition in a more positive and effective manner.

A similar situation of awareness and control exists for board members of an association, be it a federation, national or international association or chapter.

Associations: Where volunteers come together

A Chapter is an affiliate/component or local representation of a not-for-profit volunteer association in a specific state or country. By local we understand national or regional. Call it a Component or a Community, but in Europe the description could best be seen as a representation or affiliation.

The chapter model and structure is based on the affiliation the local group has with the not-for-profit "mother" association by means of a charter agreement.

The agreement states the mission, policies, procedures and rules of the association, the authorised use of the brand and the requirements of the chapter, to which both parties must agree. Another important document for any incorporated association is the By-laws. The By-laws define the legal structure of the chapter and serve as a constitution on which the chapter, affiliate or association operates.

The daily operations of a not-for-profit affiliated association or chapter are handled by a Board of Directors working on a voluntary basis, who are, in most cases, elected by membership voting. Once an organisation becomes of a certain size or complexity, the Board will generally decide to engage paid help – in some cases by hiring a secretary to cover administrative tasks or by partnering with an association management company for a more comprehensive, flexible solution.

Volunteer leadership: challenges only?

A volunteer is a person working on behalf of others or a particular cause without payment for their time and services. Despite their good intentions volunteer leaders are faced with a number of challenges in trying to take care of the daily chapter operations.

➤ **Time constraint**

The biggest challenge nowadays relates to the time necessary for volunteer work given the demands and pressures of today's working environment and the volunteer's "real" day job.

➤ **Unclear job description**

Not having a full understanding of the role and responsibilities of a volunteer leader. Smooth functioning volunteer boards are generally those for whom clear guidelines have been established from the outset. Successful organisations establish a Board or Chapter handbook with a well defined job description for each position (President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, Membership Development, Operations, Marketing). The job description sets expectations and requirements. By agreeing to what is outlined in the handbook the volunteer knows in advance what he or she is committing to, the level of responsibility and authority and the likely time involved in this new "job".

➤ **Commitment**

In Europe, volunteers tend to think more of personal gain and return on investment, whereas in the United States for instance, it is regarded as an honour to serve as a volunteer in a not-for-profit association. For the Europeans and Asians it is vital that the association clearly articulates and markets the advantages of volunteer leadership such as the development of soft skills that he or she might never have the opportunity to develop in his/her professional career.

➤ **Recognition**

Board members need to feel that their input as volunteer to the Chapter is valued. By motivating volunteers, they will feel a valued part of the leadership. Board members become de-motivated and discouraged when their input is ignored or they do not receive sufficient recognition.

The strategic plan

Associations need to have a clear strategic plan which should be shared with all chapters, committees and task forces to ensure that alignment is in place. Only with this strategic plan is the association able to grow and establish a recognisable brand name. Alignment with the strategic plan is important for the association's brand awareness, reputation and the decision making process. Volunteer leaders typically have brilliant and far reaching ideas, but not everything can be achieved with limited resources. To help determine priorities and recognise which initiatives to pursue, board members should ask themselves whether their ideas are in line with the strategic plan and overarching goals: if yes, they can be further developed; if not, they should be shelved.

Have By-laws and a constitution in place

The legislative framework when dealing with daily chapter operations and decision making is key. Implementation according to the By-laws on which the Chapter operates is also essential. If a conflict or an issue of trust arises, chapter leaders can refer to the By-laws which outline the code of conduct, constitution and the policies to which they affiliate themselves.

It is quite common for board members to have a conflict mainly due to a lack of trust or insufficient communication amongst the board members. If no signed agreement is in place and no By-laws to fall back on then simple problems can become complex legal issues and can have a significant impact on a chapter.

It is therefore necessary to have the legal aspects of Chapter operations in place and make sure that all parties are aware of the By-laws and sign a legally binding document in agreement.

In most cases, board members are not aware of the legislative procedures where daily Chapter operations are concerned. This is often due to the fact that they have succeeded a former board member and that board member has not left a manual or job description. This will slow down the decision making process and will hinder the growth of a Chapter as a board member needs to start right from the beginning and search for the information.

In addition to the By-laws, it is recommended to have a policy manual in place that provides the answers to legal questions and procedures.

Preparing Chapters for legal issues

Chapter leaders need to act in a legal and ethically responsible manner. This includes being familiar with all governance documents; local, state, and national business and association laws; and tax related laws and requirements.

Over the normal lifecycle of a chapter, leaders will need to be prepared to handle many different types of legal issues. Fortunately many of them are both common and simple to handle.

Common legal issues include:

- Discrimination
- Negligence
- Personal injury (slander, defamation)
- Violation of antitrust and other government laws
- Bodily injury, medical expenses
- Property damage, fire damage liability
- Bad faith

Conflicts can also arise with third parties: if no proper agreements are made and problems arise, the external parties involved can sue the Chapter, implying legal implications.

Last year, a Chapter of a large international organisation based in Europe organised an event with some 300 attendees, with the support of a local partner association. For this, the Chapter decided to pay the volunteer who was in charge of managing the full event. An hourly rate was agreed upon plus a percentage on the profit. The event eventually went well, but there were many issues in the organisation, mainly due to personal conflicts. The paid volunteer in charge of the project, did not accept the final bonus calculation and decided to sue the Chapter. Is intervention of the mother association's

staff needed in such a situation? The answer is yes. Staff will be essential in guiding this conflict through the right legal channels set up within the Association and assisting in finding a solution to which both parties can agree.

Daily staff support

A Chapter counts on the support of the mother association's headquarters or regional office staff. Their job is to provide chapters with regular and informative guidance, to ensure that the local Chapter's activities are consistent with the association's strategic plan.

Top Ten actions for staff to best support chapters

1. Be pro active with regular outreach to Chapters, providing them with up to date marketing tools and online tools for Chapter and membership development
2. Share best practices amongst Chapters, aiming to enhance the communication and daily activities this can be done by means of a webinar, web forum or regular touch base calls
3. Attend local Chapter events to promote the value proposition of the association with promotional materials, personal involvement and relationship building
4. Facilitate members communication through social media
5. Provide regional support to enhance efficiencies and avoid duplication of effort
6. Have a personal, friendly approach, act as a key communicator, coach
7. Be quick to respond – volunteer leaders deserve a fast and efficient response
8. Be open to diversity and use creative thinking
9. Advise on financial issues (local VAT)
10. Advise on legal issues (local legislation)

The smooth and efficient functioning of an association's chapters or affiliates is fundamental for growth, membership satisfaction and brand consistency.

Compare the structure and formation of a chapter to that of building a house: start with the foundation (identify needs), build it up (attract members) and put a roof on top (result) and align it with the strategic plan of the mother association. Within this house the members gain further knowledge by exchanging and experiencing knowledge, and obtain the tools that they need in order to advance to the highest levels of volunteer leadership. If an association has an aligned strategic plan in place, decisions are easier to make in a timely manner, thus enabling volunteers to get maximum benefit from their leadership position.

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