Improving Product Development in Associations through Collaboration and Information Sharing

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INFORMATION SHARING AND COLLABORATION

Associations and societies are in the information and education business. This is true whether information is delivered in print (books, magazines, journals) or live (educational seminars and conferences) or electronically. There are many interdependencies among the association's publishing program and other information-driven programs, such as certification, conferences, education (professional development), standards, E-learning, and symposia.

Successful associations recognize the interrelationships among programs and work hard to *integrate* annual and strategic planning across all these programs. They purge the silo mentality by knocking down interdepartmental walls that stifle collaboration and information sharing. How do they accomplish this?

Information needs to be shared interdepartmentally in the organization. Associations' resources may be stretched with limited staff to accomplish multiple tasks so the tendency is to use the excuse of being "too busy" to keep others informed. However, not sharing information interdepartmentally can be an impediment and a significant drag on the growth of publications.

Open, honest communication is an important characteristic of an organization with positive people dynamics. Ask yourself: Does everyone in the organization share information—and share it in a time-critical way? Does information move in all directions: upwards, downwards, and sideways?

Open communication and idea sharing foster a creative environment. A trusting culture generates a high tolerance for risk and a respect for everyone's ideas. Creativity and risk-taking are at the heart of healthy *new product development* in a strong nonprofit publishing program.

Associations with publishing programs are different from commercial companies that publish only books or only magazines. Associations are "naturals" at the information and education business, producing content through a variety of internal departments. For example, in addition to a publishing program, an association produces information content through certification, education, technical services and meetings and convention units.

WHAT HINDERS PUBLICATIONS GROWTH?

Most organizations are staffed with capable, smart people who want to succeed, but who are sometimes hindered by dysfunctional organizational structures and toxic corporate culture. Structure, lack of process, resistance to change, silo management, and an ingrained status quo mentality at the senior executive level all militate against the growth of an organization's business—notably, publications and education.

If internal communications are hampered by organizational maladies and there isn't a suitable forum for the open exchange of ideas then your publishing operation could be in jeopardy.

As you think about new product development in your organization, ask these questions: What is the role of our staff in the new product development process? How do we involve staff in the new product development process? What are the organizational impediments to new product development?

WHY SO MUCH SILOING IN ASSOCIATIONS?

Associations create departmental silos for a variety of reasons. Some staff horde information for their own purposes, often because they are competing for resources with other departments. For many, controlling and not sharing information is power. Other staff members are afflicted with the "Not Invented Here Syndrome," while

some are not educated to think outside their departmental boundaries. Other times, senior managers get isolated from the "rank and file" of the organization and are perceived as elitists. All of these situations are true to an extent in all organizations and all lead to the silo effect.

We find that there are two major reasons that silos exist in associations. First, staff does not take the time to share information with colleagues; and second, there is no organized process or venue for working collaboratively. But first let's ask, "What hinders growth in publications?"

PUBLISHING IS A BUSINESS OF IDEAS

An open sharing of ideas across all departments is critical in the publishing business. If your organization is saddled with silos and a culture resistant to new ideas, you will develop new product with great difficulty. The silo mentality and resistance to new ideas are major inhibitors to the growth of many publishing businesses.

From interviews I conducted during management audits, read what staff had to say about sharing ideas. These comments are fairly typical in many organizations:

- **We are not receptive to new ideas. Boards and committees, difficult to do anything new around here, do everything. A change takes forever. In- house dynamics hurt new ideas. Our CEO wants new ideas; Senior Executives do not want ideas.**

- **We need cross-functional teams to look at ALL of our programs and information products, organize them into topical areas, and cross-sell them throughout all of the organization's activities.**

- **There's automatic resistance to cooperative efforts that cross over departmental lines—**

people here a long time think that they're only responsible for their own budgets and don't look at the whole.

- **No real good system to research, develop and launch new products; a struggle to get good marketing data to make sure ideas are feasible and viable.**

What do these comments mean to executive leaders? Every staff member is a valuable resource for new product development ideas. Pay attention to what your customer care, sales, marketing and membership departments tell you. If you don't currently have a process to routinely gather information from these areas, develop one.

WHAT DETERMINES SUCCESS IN PUBLISHING?

Experience demonstrates that the most important element in successful publishing is a staff of motivated, capable people willing to work collaboratively and to share ideas organization wide.

Consider the following truisms:

- Publishing is a business based on people, process, and creativity. Technology supports publishing, but without people, process, and creativity, nothing is published.

- Successful new product development doesn't happen in a vacuum. It requires product champions from all areas of the organization, a clearly delineated process to generate and vet new ideas, and an experienced and inspired leader to manage their development and introduction.

- One of the most powerful assets an organization possesses to create new publishing products is small group dynamics. Understand small group dynamics--the behavior and leadership of teams--

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and you will be well on your way to the development of a continuous stream of new products.

- No one template exists to optimally organize a publishing unit in a nonprofit organization. Greater variation exists in organizational structures of nonprofit organizations than in commercial publishing.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO STRENGTHEN IDEA SHARING ACROSS DEPARTMENTS?

Recommendations

In order to improve the climate for the sharing of ideas, organizations should consider these two actions.

Implement a knowledge management (KM) system.

A KM system is a way of organizing and sharing staff knowledge on an interdepartmental basis. A knowledge management system won't happen on its own. Someone must own it, organize it, and nurture its implementation. To learn more about knowledge management systems, click this link PD-15 Knowledge Management, New Product Development, and Nonprofit Publishing, 2009, 3 pages.

In the book, Professional Practices in Association Management (Washington, D.C., ASAE, 2007), chapter 19 by Richard V. Lawson, "Knowledge Management," presents an excellent introduction tailored to associations.

Lawson states that organizations adopt KM because of the desire to

- gain competitive advantage
- have greater innovation
- provide better customer experiences
- maintain competency in best practices
- provide knowledge access for global organizations;

- create a network effect between employees to increase quality of shared information
- facilitate organizational learning
- manage intellectual capital

A KM system will leverage all your strengths as an association by harnessing all the collective knowledge and talent of staff and volunteers.

Hold annual new product development/marketing cross-departmental retreats.

A retreat is based on the premise that your staff is knowledgeable and collectively possesses many excellent ideas. Your most precious organizational asset is the intellectual capital of your people. The task, then, is to plan and conduct retreats that foster the kind of creative climate that enables participants from all areas of the organization to freely brainstorm new ideas, decide the most expedient and effective ways to develop them into products or processes, and assign responsibility and accountability as appropriate.

FINAL THOUGHTS

In many organizations, collaboration is blocked by knowledge hoarding and silos. This mentality leads to power struggles, lack of cooperation, and loss of productivity. Lack of collaboration is a fact of life in all organizations. What counts is that leaders recognize this and strive to create a collaborative culture. Knowledge sharing is an ongoing process, not an end-point.

ABOUT JOHN B. MCHUGH, PUBLISHING CONSULTANT

John B. "Jack" McHugh is a 40 year veteran of the publishing business. Jack has worked as an executive for Houghton Mifflin, Wadsworth, and Saint Mary's Press. Jack is also an experienced association publishing executive. For seven years, he was Publisher and Director of Programs at the American Society for Quality and for a two-year period, he served as the Interim Publisher at the Project Management Institute. He is a member of the ASAE Advisory Board for Publishing, Communications, and Media Issues and Practices.

Jack's specialties include association/nonprofit publishing, book publishing, executive recruiting, journal publishing, rights and permissions, new ventures, organizational design, and social media strategy and policy.

McHugh and Liz Novak, of IAPD, are co-authoring a series of papers on Networking Techniques. Jack McHugh is also the manager of theLinkedIn™ group, Association and Nonprofit Publishing.

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