

To: The Appalachian Mountain Club Board of Directors and Executive Director
From: Centerpoint Consultation Services (Group 2)
Subject: Preserving Membership Involvement in the AMC
Date: 04-04-2007

Introduction: Managing change, and the daunting task of resurrecting the financial viability of the Appalachian Mountain Club, the organization's leadership hired an outsider with proven success under similar conditions to steer AMC in a new direction. Judging by the apparent mandate given to the new Executive Director, there was an organization wide consensus within the AMC that changes were necessary. Unfortunately, conflicts arise when changes outpace our ability to adjust, or when stakeholders feel as though their needs and concerns are marginalized. Effectively managing change requires more than simply providing technical solutions-it requires an open and inclusive dialogue. Without authentic membership involvement and dialogue, the AMC will lose its most supportive piece of the organization; its communal partnership.

The Problem: We recognize that the executive director of the AMC brought the organization back from the brink of bankruptcy by recruiting professional staff, and packing the council with members who were sympathetic to his reform efforts. This created a problem by altering the balance of power within the organization. Centralizing authority in the hands of the executive director and the board of directors may have been vital in resurrecting the financial viability of the AMC, but we see that this past crisis management mode will not be sustainable in the long term, given the strong traditions of chapter autonomy and volunteer participation. The new emphasis on conservation and environmental advocacy will most likely be perceived as top-down decision making by the chapters of the club, thus, taking away the concept of the AMC as a volunteer based organization. We fear that long- time members will contest that their beloved institution

has evolved into a political venture that is more concerned with donations than grassroots participation. We believe that members will likely feel as though the values of the organization are changing, and that they have no input in the process; resulting in a high level of disaffection.

Why Discord among Members is a problem:

While the executive director and the board of directors is cognizant of the fact that more “face time” will need to be devoted to the chapters in order to bring them on board with Vision 2000, the new priorities, coupled with unilateral implementation, can potentially polarize the AMC’s central and regional authorities. We believe that the executive director’s main challenge and most pressing problems are to convince the chapters to internalize the organizations new priorities. If the AMC’s management neglects to take the organization’s cultural history into account and does not create an open dialogue that encourages and empowers decision making at lower levels of the organization, Vision 2000 could be inhibited. The executive director needs to begin the change process by concentrating on the board and the employees; understanding that a great deal of power and organizational change lies in the chapters and its volunteers.

Gorman (2000) describes one of the biggest mistakes in change management is the failure to understand the importance of people. If people in the organization are not fully included in the transformational process, they are more likely to be resistant to change. Members in the organization also have to understand that change is crucial for accomplishing the organization’s mission; they need to be informed about all the steps that the organization is taking. Although most AMC members agreed that change was vital, they did not share an agreement about what would be changed. For the visioning practice, all people have to take part to ensure ownership of the

changing process. The organizational change in the AMC is a large scale transformational process which often comes with emotional reactions of the employees (Gorman, 2000). Emotional reactions to change are even more prevalent in grassroots organizations, in which people identify very strongly with their work and mission. It is important for the executive director and the board of directors to understand and facilitate these predicted reactions.

Methods to Eliminate Discontent and Empower Members in the Change Process

The AMC would benefit from actively involving all AMC stakeholders in the organizational change process. We recommend that the Club align roles and relationships so the new structure works for, rather than against, people efforts (Bolman & Deal, 2003). In the past, we have found that organizations are successful in this manner by facilitating this process through a stakeholder survey, focus groups at a local level, and face-to-face conversations with stakeholders. Some organizations have implemented all of these recommendations to assist the change process, you may choose all of them or just one depending on the needs of your members; you must be perceptive. By providing every AMC stakeholder a role in the change process, you can eliminate conflict and forge divisive issues into shared agreements (Bolman & Deal, 2003).

We recommend that the AMC develops a strategy that allows stakeholders to let go of the past, deal with the present, and move into a meaningful future (Bolman & Deal, 2003). In order to get the stakeholders involved with organizational change, we recommend a symbolic strategy. The strategy can vary, from having a few “town hall” meetings at the local level or staging a mock funeral where people are given time to grieve and say their goodbyes. By creating

a meaningful way for emotions to be expressed, you will also create a celebration and excitement for the future (Bolman & Deal 2003).

We observe that the changes occurring at the AMC are being facilitated from the top-down, leaving chapter leaders and volunteers without a voice in the process. By asking chapter leaders and volunteers to change the direction of their work, advocate policy or accommodate large numbers of new members, you are asking them to do something they don't understand, don't know how to do, or don't believe in. We recommend creating a space where negotiation and communication can occur. A successful model is an advisory council or committee made up of chapter leaders and volunteers. We believe that creating such a space will facilitate realignment to the new direction of the organization, allowing participation and involvement in AMC's Vision 2000.

We recognize that management is under immense pressure in this time of organizational change; consequently, we have also observed that too many organizations undervalue the importance of having all differences worked out and all scenarios discussed, ahead of time. We believe that retreats are a positive step towards developing strategies for organizational change, however, those responsible for guiding change also need training and support. Training and support will increase the likelihood that people understand and feel comfortable with the new organizational direction (Bolman & Deal, 2003).

Strengths and Limitations:

By communicating the AMC's needs and involving all stakeholders in the change process, we believe the AMC can carry out Vision 2000 effectively, but the AMC director must take into account the goals of the organization at large. Cummings and Worley (2004) state how important it is to understand the power structures in an organization. While it is crucial that all members are informed about all the steps the organization is taking, the chapters also need to trust that the AMC executive director and board will maintain the organizations original missions and values. We understand there are a number of issues affecting the AMC at this time. However, by concentrating efforts on managing the change process, many issues will cease to exist.

Recommendations

- Involve all the AMC stakeholders in the change process
- Facilitate a time and space for people's emotions
- Create a space where issues can be resolved
- Provide training for AMC Management

Conclusion:

We believe that AMC's management needs to take the organization's cultural history into account and create an open dialogue that encourages and empowers decision making at lower levels of the organization. The executive director can facilitate this process by concentrating on the board and the employees; understanding that the power to make organizational change lies in the chapters and its volunteers.

References:

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