

Mind the Gap

Collective thinking avoids tripping

The On Volunteers column in the January, 1, 2001 issue of The NonProfit Times focused on the "seven stages" of evolution of nonprofit organizations. These stages were:

- The first people who see a need before anyone else and start shouting about it (becoming the lumatic fringe);
- Slowly gathering others to the cause;
- Growing into a more mainstream group;
- Eventually raising money to hire some paid staff to assist burned-out volunteers;
- Increasing paid staff and re-deploying volunteers to assist them;
- Adding more paid staff until volunteers are no longer allowed to provide essential client services (except for being on the board); and finally,
- Evolving into an entrenched institution that seeks volunteers to freshen up the place. This timeline repeats itself everywhere and organizations can be found at every point on the continuum.

In this issue, let's look at what happens to the relationship between local-level volunteers and national headquarters staff as the organization moves into the fifth and sixth stages of evolution. Here's how the situation tends to play out:

■ It's somewhere between 15 and 30 years since the organization was founded as a grassroots effort, often as a protest movement pioneering new ideas. Today

most volunteers and almost all paid staff in the organization have come on board well after the early days, but a percentage of the founding members are still engaged and remember how things "used to be." The longest-serving members of staff generally started as volunteers in the field and moved up.

■ National headquarters has increased its staffing, adding the sort of specialists a larger organization needs, especially in the areas of communications, marketing, financial management, and computer technology. These people have been hired directly on to the national level because of their professional qualifications, but usually without any direct prior involvement with the organization at the affiliate, branch or chapter level. Despite this lack of personal connection to the field, national staff is expected to start right in providing services supporting those in the field.

■ At the same time, the national board of directors – formerly those closest to the mission/cause/problem – begins to look outside itself for additional members, particularly those with corporate or other strong community connections to new resources. So the board, too, moves further away from personal connection to the field.

■ To support the cost of the growing national infrastructure, local affiliates or chapters are increasingly expected to fundraise, turning over an ever-larger percent of their income to the national office. Often a new layer of administration – the regional office – is estab-

lished, ostensibly to bring support closer to the local level but also to assure quality control and consistency, as dictated from above.

You can see the recipe for alienation, as frontline members/volunteers feel more and more pushed to the bottom and less and less able to have an impact on the direction of the organization.

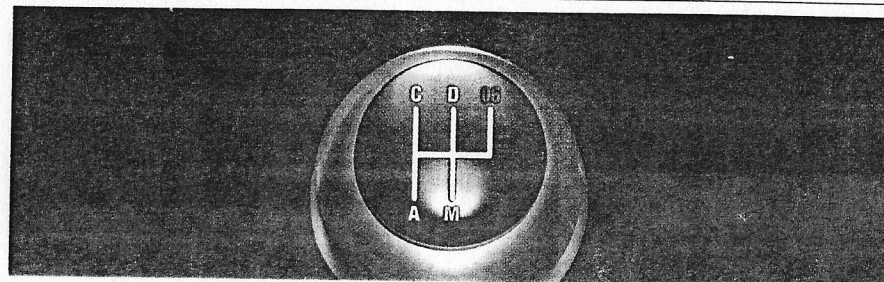
It's important to stress that all of this occurs with the very best of intentions. The reason so many organizations grow like this is that, to be successful in affecting social change on a wide scale (which is what most nonprofits aim to do), it's necessary to have structure, systems, national standards, and highly skilled leaders. Everyone, paid or volunteer, continues to be highly devoted to the organization's mission. In fact, many of the projects and programs implemented nationally are effective approaches to meeting that mission. But there's now a serious gap between the national level and the local level of the organization.

Ignore this gap at your peril. An organization must be integrated to be successful. If local participants become disaffected, they will either leave or begin to do what they want despite national dictates. While it's easy for staff in the national office to judge how things are going by how headquarters seems to function, the field is the foundation for everything. Loose the loyalty and willingness of the field to implement the organization's plans, and nothing will get done.

continued on page 31

Take a closer look.

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ON VOLUNTEERS

continued from page 10

Here is a real-life example of the problem, fictionalized for confidentiality.

Advocacy Group W (AGW) has been trying to change people's attitudes about their cause for decades and always wanted to have effective media tools to use on television and radio, especially to reach teenagers. In the past, the most powerful form of public education has been the speeches given to all sorts of community and school audiences by the group's members who are themselves personally impacted by the problem under discussion.

At last AGW has obtained a large corporate sponsor and paid a high-powered advertising firm to produce various wonderful videos. Because the program is multi-media, a team of technicians has been hired to travel the country with the presentation. The idea is to have the local chapters "book" a visit by the team, pay for the costs, and follow the national script.

When the videos are introduced, with great fanfare, at the national conference of AGW chapter leaders, the national staff is surprised at the unexpectedly cool reception from the field. From national's perspective, they've been working on exactly what the field needs and wants, and have been telling everyone for months that the videos will soon be available. The local volunteers, of course, know that the new material is glitzy and wonderful, but also see clearly that they no longer have any way to personalize or adapt the presentations. They also think that the scheduling structure has been superimposed on them rather arbitrarily.

Will the new public education program work? It probably will work, since the AGW national office can leverage some national airtime and the various connections of their corporate partners. The problem is that no one will measure what has been lost by cutting out the local contribution, nor know how even more successful the effort might be if everyone, all along the line, were supporting it fully.

Can such a situation be improved? Absolutely. Here are just a few ideas:

- Acknowledge that the changes are indeed changes.
- Celebrate what used to be done and the people who did it.
- Clarify the new roles that will replace the old.

Make every national staff member work with a steering committee of local representatives. Today this can be done by conference calls and listservs, and therefore is much less costly and time consuming than in the past. Rotate membership on these committees each year or two, making sure to gather

ideas from a mix of long-time and new members with diverse interests and from different geographic areas. Use the committees as think tanks. Do this genuinely and the members will tell others on the local level that you are listening to their opinions. They do not have control, but if you listen to their input, you'll know when their advice should be followed.

Involve volunteers at national headquarters in much the same way that a local agency recruits volunteers to help in the work. There are undoubtedly organization members living near the national office who would love to be of help, as well as non-member volunteers who can be recruited for their special skills. The point is to make national staff see and hear "real" constituents on a daily basis.

Create interactive areas of your Web site and encourage online participation in discussing specific questions.

Encourage tours of headquarters by any visiting members, whether as a group or individually.

The London Underground tells passengers to "mind the gap" simply to make them aware of the need to step carefully. Your organization will figure out the right ways to maintain strong field/national relations, but only if it recognizes the potential problem. *NPT*

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