

Collaborative Leadership

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I recently had the honor of facilitating a weekend retreat for a group of statewide leaders. Some of the participants hold positions on a state level but the vast majority of attendees hold local level positions. This retreat was offered primarily as an opportunity for the statewide leadership team to do some strategic planning and goal development to guide the work of the organization for the next two years.

At the conclusion of this event I reviewed the evaluation forms that participants completed. One of the comments that stood out to me was the fact that some people had been unable to make the connection between the statewide strategic planning and goal development activities they participated in and the application of these ideas to the work they perform on a local level. This disconnect perplexed me. As someone who works first from a bigger picture I had to step back and view this event from the lens of someone who might see their local organization as a silo – a container for members and activities that is distinct from other local entities and separate from the larger organization. I began giving some consideration to the concept of “the silo effect” and how it currently impacts our organization on a local, state *and* national level.

The phrase “silo effect” is most often used in organizational and business settings, and “refers to a lack of communication and common goals between departments in an organization. It is the opposite of systems thinking in an organization. The silo effect gets its name from the farm storage silo; each silo is designated for one specific grain” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Information_silo).

What the above mentioned retreat planners were attempting to do was refine the culture of their state organization and in effect, eliminate or at least mitigate some of the consequences of the silo effect:

- The lack of a coordinated effort - each silo performs their work independent of those around them. The work of the organization therefore becomes fragmented and the organization risks the overall purpose of their organization becoming invisible to members.
- An inability to see beyond the confines of one’s own silo - this limits opportunities for collaboration and may increase redundancy of efforts.
- Possessive ownership – when opportunities for collaboration do arise members are less likely to share the work they are doing because they fail to see how it will benefit the whole.
- Competitive environment – the work of the organization becomes competitive rather than collaborative. Projects are held close to the chest as each silo strives to serve only their immediate membership or interest group.

This type of thinking is in stark contrast to the concept of systems thinking. “Systems thinking is the process of understanding how things influence one another within a whole”

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Systems_thinking). Another way to think about and language this is to holistic or collaborative organizational leadership. Consider the benefits of this approach:

- Coordinated effort – leaders and members see the totality of the organization and have an understanding of how each of their respective components is part of the larger whole. There is

recognition that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This leads to a collective bigger picture understanding of the purpose of the organization, and more concerted, collaborative and specific efforts to support that purpose.

- An ability to see the interconnectedness of each committee and group of members (member section, local entity etc.) – this promotes thought before action and a desire to work collaboratively. Leaders and members consider the impact of their decisions on the greater whole. They also seek out existing resources before reinventing the wheel, and actively promote collaboration between committees and other work groups. The result is a more efficient, creative and unified organizational environment.
- Collective ownership – the work done belongs to the organization rather than to a specific individual or group of individuals. This promotes a stronger sense of connectedness, healthy interdependence and organizational pride.
- Supportive environment – work is readily shared, and the scope of projects includes consideration of the best interest of the totality of membership rather than the highest good of a relative few.

Consider now the retreat example I mentioned earlier. What might have helped those who struggled to understand how statewide visioning, planning and goal setting benefit leadership efforts and members on a local level? As a facilitator of this event I think I could have most effectively helped make this connection prior to the start of the event by implementing some of the following tips:

- Familiarize members with the overall structure of their organization. How does each local entity fit into the statewide picture? How does the statewide entity fit into the regional picture? And how does all of this roll into the national picture?
- Map out “natural connections” between committees, work groups and member sections. Find a way to visually represent the organization, and then allow the group to draw connections between those entities whose work directly impacts the other(s). Ask each sub-group to keep this visual visible each time they do work so that they have a reminder that their work impacts a larger whole, and that there are resources available in other committees and work groups that may aide them in their own work.
- Communicate the goals of the national and statewide organization as often and in as many different formats as possible. Help members draw a connection between the work they are doing and the overall goals of the organization, and use these goals as a means to help guide the work of the organization. If a specific project or group of ideas falls outside of the scope of the current goals it may be wise to place the information in a “parking lot” for inclusion in next year’s strategic planning and goal setting activities.

We have reached a point in the development of our field where it is critical that we work together as one unit rather than a group of individual silos. Each action we take has a ripple effect that eventually reaches every corner of the organization. It’s time to shift our perspective, and our culture, to one in which we serve each other with the same dedication we embrace in serving our consumers.