

3 New Wakeup Calls for Change

Summary: Getting your association's staff and volunteers on board with change is a lot like getting a stubborn teenager to wake up in the morning. It's all about getting their attention and removing their comfort with the familiar.

By: Dan Ratner

Have you ever tried waking up a teenager early in the morning? He ignores the alarm clock, hits the snooze button constantly, makes promises to get out of bed he doesn't intend to keep, and he may even get out of bed in your presence but crawl right back in once you leave the room.

This is not unlike some staff and volunteer leaders you've pleaded with for years to get on board with change. You've waited and waited to see a change in the way they work. You've pleaded with them and beaten your head against the wall trying to convince them to take action, innovate, and drive change forward. Yet, when you look into their blank faces, you can tell they've "checked out." They hear you but just aren't listening. If they respond, they respond the way they always do and stall progress to keep a comfort level with which they are accustomed.

Here are three responses for waking up these stakeholders and getting them out of their stupor, to move forward with change:

1. Sound a New Alarm

When I was a teenager, my dad felt my alarm clock wasn't effective enough, so he played John Philip Sousa marches set at volume level 11 on the stereo. It worked. He got my attention and sounded an alarm I couldn't ignore.

Since you're familiar with your team's standard response, you can plan to react in a different way and catch them off guard. When their reason for not changing surfaces, respond by saying:

"That's exactly why you should [insert the change you want]."

After saying it, pause and wait for the dumbfounded look on their faces and then deliver a reason that makes your point. Here's an example:

- Stubborn Stan: "Well, we did that before and it didn't work."
- Response: "That's exactly why you should try it again right now. [pause] Baby boomers are retiring, technology has changed the way our members do things, and the new economy is providing more opportunities for this strategy to succeed rather than fail like it did back then."

You've now eliminated this objection from their arsenal and neutralized their efforts to stall progress. You can now move on to deal with any other concerns.

2. Show Them the Clock

You've told your teenager for the past hour and a half that he needs to wake up, but nothing's more motivating than showing him a time on an alarm clock that says he is late.

You have expertise and experience that should not be ignored, but if your colleagues are afraid that you are trying to drive change based on your personal opinion or your "wild ideas," showing them the data should reduce their fears.

It's about moving from egotistical to statistical. Try saying:

"You don't have to listen to me, but you can't ignore the data."

This helps set aside any perception of personal gain that some may feel is in the mix, and it focuses attention on facts and figures.

3. Increase Their Discomfort

Your teenager has layer upon layer of blankets surrounding him creating a warm, delicate cocoon of pleasure. How could he possibly want to change that? The only way to get his attention is to start peeling away those layers of comfort until there is nothing left to do but to get "up and at 'em."

For some stakeholders, they've been in that comfort zone for a long, long time. They've made their bed and they want to lie in it. You are up against years and possibly decades of steadfast business rules, policies, and procedures.

When meeting with volunteer leaders or staff, approach the meeting with the notion that you will gain commitment on some change or movement in the right direction. Planning ahead is the key to success in this approach. Determine the minimum amount of commitment that is acceptable and have realistic expectations for outcomes. Announce at the beginning of the meeting:

"When this meeting is complete, all of us will have committed to leaving the current practices in the past and adopting a new approach in performing this task."

This will help peel away the layers of comfort and familiarity that have built up over time around the old methods of doing business. And once you throw off the covers, then you can start to remake the bed.

These approaches may not work to convince the unconvinced, but you can't expect others to approach change if you, as a leader of change, are unable or unwilling to change your approach. The type of change that will matter will not happen overnight, but maybe by using these responses you won't lose sleep over it.

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