

Organizational Growth and Development or Is Your Maple Association Working?

Kathryn Hopkins, Extension Professor, University of Maine Cooperative Extension

Organizations grow and develop like children, animals or plants. Understanding organizational growth can help make sense of what is happening in maple producer organizations. The common maxim about volunteer groups is that 10% of the people do 90% of the work. Is that happening in your group? Is your association composed of worker bees or socialites or some combination of members filling various roles? Is the association working efficiently and effectively?

Organizational experts describe three or more stages of growth for most organizations. Most agree that there is a first, beginning or start-up stage that leads to a juvenile or growth stage, and eventually to a relatively stable mature stage. In any organization run with volunteers, like most maple producer organizations, members are likely to be at different developmental stages depending on the length of time they have participated in the group. This can create stressful situations if members are unaware that this is natural. One com-

mon factor at any stage is a member's desire for meaningful involvement and recognition.

At the beginning stages of many maple organizations, there may be only a few passionate people developing the vision of the organization and performing the tasks required to move the idea from concept to establishment. The organizers serve as both the members and the worker/leaders of the association. Because the immediate needs are obvious there is little need or time for long range planning and most activities are reactive rather than proactive.

As groups develop and move into an intermediate stage of development, they need more clarity and consensus building about both member and leader roles especially as they acquire more people. At this stage, association leaders may begin to feel burnout or may be unwilling to make changes especially if they feel they are experiencing success on behalf of their producers. They may

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not realize that they have outgrown their initial organizational framework and need to move toward a new organizational model. Association leadership and fundraising issues may arise as well as a need for longer range or strategic planning to guide producers' organizations. Most people have been or are involved in a number of work or volunteer organizations and may recognize some of these stages.

During an intermediate developmental stage there is an opportunity for growth or decline or sometimes both growth and decline at the same time. This period of change can be stressful as the maple association provides services to its members and the public, addresses governance issues, fundraises, provides financial oversight, and conducts strategic planning. It is during this phase of development that an organization may shift from being only a programming organization to adding policy and fundraising tasks, requiring an official board of directors and possibly paid staff. This may result in people leaving an association if they feel their talents do not fit well with policy issues and fundraising. Retention of a wide range of talent is more likely if the maple association's members and board of directors understand that service to the group requires both policy management and programming in order to be successful. The successful maple producer association will offer a range of policy, service and programming opportunities that complements its mission and makes the most of its members' various talents.

When an association reaches a mature stage, members and leaders have clear and established roles and itemized responsibilities. A clear mission

has been established, high quality programs and a positive public reputation are developed, and leaders and members hold each other accountable for agreed upon responsibilities. Systems are in place to both grow the organization and maintain and support the existing parts of the organization. Has your maple association reached this point?

At each stage of development organizations are as effective as the collective experience level and awareness of the members. Producer association development is messy and time consuming and few associations develop in a straight line. Every organization must be aware of and meet the challenges of growing and maintaining its programs while also remaining relevant to its members. They must meet the challenge of developing the board of directors, volunteers, paid staff, and the financing they need to be successful.

How does an organization find out where it is and where its members are? Michael Burns of BWB Solutions suggests a five-step process for finding an organization's place(s). The first step is to take stock of both tangible and intangible assets. Tangible assets are finances, equipment and members. Intangible assets include reputation and support from non-member community leaders. The second step is to assess local, regional, national and international external circumstances that impact the association's growth. The third step is to identify internal needs and activities by cataloguing time spent on different tasks and prioritizing who is responsible for what tasks and which tasks have priority. The fourth step is to identify where needs are not being met between programs and projects, policies and

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actual practices, budgets and actual expenses. The fifth step is to assemble the information and then take action on what has been discovered. Reviewing the information can show where the organization needs to move forward, step backward or reorganize.

Understanding growth stages will help to understand how the organization commits to its mission and how the important work of the organization is conducted especially when things don't go smoothly. Different parts of the organization may be in different phases of organizational development as they work through different projects. Understanding this strengthens and empowers the directors and members of any group to move in a positive direction and achieve the mission to which the organization is committed.

For a checklist of how your organization is working, see the example created by the Greater Twin Cities United Way located here: <http://bit.ly/1LNWdux> It can be completed online if you want to submit your name to a business company or the sections can be printed off for your use. Not every item on the checklist is relevant to maple producer associations but most of the sections will help show the strengths of and the opportunities for your maple association. Reviewing this checklist should generate useful discussions for your association and should streamline its work and possibly lighten the load.

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