

Bring people along on the strategic decision-making journey

By Meredith Low

At a **presentation I made recently**, someone in the group made the point very gracefully that you can't expect anyone – staff, board, volunteers – to understand strategic decision-making, if they don't have the proper context. As a very wise person I used to work with would put it, you have to bring them along on the journey with you. And this is so very true. Often there are facts not available to everyone.

Increasingly in the association sector, the senior management are association professionals. They may not be now, and maybe never were, members of the profession or in the industry they work with. There's a developing field of knowledge which is available to them that is not available to their board in the same way – **conferences**, webinars, networking events. (Even blog posts by consultants!)

Similarly, members of the industry or profession have a perspective on the industry which the staff of the association simply can't match. Even then, they won't all understand the industry in the same way – all the more so if there are deep divides. Use of technology, public vs. private sector, large company vs. self-employed, incumbents vs. new entrants – all these ways of segmenting your membership also represent ways in which they see the world differently. This will be true for members, and **typically for board members**.

All of this means that strategic decisions can take people by surprise, delaying adoption and implementation, and driving a wedge between the organization and its stakeholders.

So, how do you bring people along? Some suggestions:

- ***Integrate strategic decision-making with communications.*** Think of your strategy development and implementation processes as content machines. All of your content vehicles – your website, newsletter, conference, events, anything – should routinely include something to do with your strategic issues. (If not, what are they there for?)
- ***Share all the research*** you've commissioned, whether it's for strategic planning or otherwise. You may not want to publish the full report, warts and all, on your website, but you should find ways to communicate the fact base – the findings and implications of the research you've done, as well as analysis from other sources.
- ***Make it a discussion.*** Create opportunities to hear what people make of the same data you're seeing. Research itself can do that, but so can online discussion forums, in-person topic discussions at conferences and events, or road shows by the leadership at chapter events. Carefully consider what will happen to this input, and be brutally honest about the process, though. Don't pretend something is still up for open-ended discussion when the

board has already committed to a particular course of action. Likewise, don't make commitments without getting enough input. Sometimes the big elements of a strategy have been locked down and committed to – **but you still need lots of input about the specifics of getting it done.** Don't let disagreement be a reason not to keep talking.

- ***Increase the velocity and cycle frequency*** of all of the above. Often communicating and sharing is a bit of an afterthought or tacked onto the end of big, tough projects (getting a piece of research done; finalizing a strategic plan). The problem is that communicating becomes something you get around to when you have a chance, after tackling all your other to-do lists that have languished as you worked on The Big Project. Communication also runs the risk of being over-managed, over-edited, over-approved – “just run it by so-and-so.” But in this case I think the perfect is the enemy of the good. Can you do more to just get something out the door, quickly? Aim for real-time. Question delays. Make sure it's someone's job, and not just off the corner of their desk, either.

Whether it's the strategic planning process itself or the implementation of specific strategies, it's important to try to create common ground. This isn't for some kind of hollow “buy-in” – it's key to having a healthy organization that knits together shared interests

What do you think? What else have you seen that helps create a shared understanding and dialogue?

If you'd like to discuss further, please **get in touch.**

Meredith Low is a management consultant specializing in strategy, research, and marketing for professional associations and business-to-business companies.