HOW TO STRETCH YOUR ORGANIZATION

The more you stretch, the more effective your organization will become. Follow these seven suggestions.

BY PETER BRINCKERHOFF

I know what you're thinking. You're already stretched to the limit! But to keep your organization flexible, you need to stretch, and stretch regularly. In other words, you need to make small, regular changes in the way you do things so that you don't forget *how* to try new things. Here are ways to keep your organization limber:

1. Innovate.

Leaders like you need to light the candle of innovation to show others the way. You need to consider ideas for innovation openly, fairly, and regularly. You also need to develop new and improved ways of doing things yourself.

For example, one Boy Scout troop recently faced financial problems. Since the scouts often forget their weekly dues or weren't at every meeting, income from dues had fallen dramatically. The troop leader suggested that they mail a statement to the scouts' parents once a year rather than have scouts bring dues to the weekly meetings. The treasurer objected. He had been in his job for 15 years and didn't want the system changed. Despite his objections, the council asked the scouts' parents what they thought of the idea. Unanimously, they loved it. The troop gained the parents' approbation, solved its financial problem, and streamlined the organization's operation.

This example shows how important it is not to subscribe to the self-limiting perspective of "But we've always done it this way." Although the innovation was not a huge one, it dramatically improved the overall organization.

Small changes, a little at a time, add up to a culture of innovation. The important thing is not to get stuck in a rut. Try something different. Call out for pizza one lunchtime and sit around talking for a half hour. Buy a set of humorous post-it notes and use them throughout the office. Try a creative fundraising idea that another organization has found to work. Hold meetings in different rooms or at different times occasionally. At least get people to sit in different places.

Whatever small change you make, it's better than doing it the same old way. If your organization loses its capacity to innovate, it won't be able to accommodate to the inevitably changing needs and wants of its constituencies.

2. Take Risks.

Stretching means taking chances. You're trying something new and even with your best intentions, it may not work the way you want it to. But you need to take risks to test new ways of doing things, to find out what works and what doesn't. If you duplicate what works and don't repeat what *doesn't* work, it's called learning.

Remember, there are no failed experiments. In an experiment, you have a hypothesis, you test it, and it is proved valid or invalid. Either way, if you learn, the experiment succeeds.

Risk is a good thing, in moderation. For your organization, you need to think about how to stretch out in new ways, how to observe and learn from your peer organizations. The problem is that too many nonprofits are risk-averse: They're afraid that if their ideas don't work they'll be branded as failures. But the risks you should be taking with your organization aren't for you; they're for the people that your organization serves. Thus, you and your staff need to learn how to take prudent risks in pursuit of your mission.

To moderate your risk, you need to learn business planning skills and use them to reduce–but never eliminate–your risk in developing new programs, new ideas, new ways of providing services. Business planning is designed to reduce risk to the extent humanly possible, so take this technique and use it to strengthen your organization.

3. Improve a Little Each Day.

One way of stretching your organization is to incorporate steady improvements into your thinking and that of your staff. Slow, steady improvements also overcome the resistance to change that we so fear as managers. The Japanese have a great outlook on this. They say: Don't attempt 100 percent improvement all at once. Rather, improve one percent a day *every* day. This is good advice. You need to be asking yourself and your staff: What can we do today to make ourselves

more efficient? What can we do to add value to our services? What can we do to improve our community image, to make the people who pay us happier, to provide services in a more personal way?

Look at it this way: With all the things your organization does, with all the interactions with the community and the people you serve that are occurring right now, there have to be hundreds of small but important ways you can improve. Make it your goal to end each day with the assurance that somewhere in your organization, things have gotten just a little better.

Make steady organizational improvement part of every staff meeting. Ask staff to bring lists of their ideas for small but important improvements. Tell them that there are no improvements that are too small to consider. Talk about the staff's ideas openly, and approve those that you can. Most of these ideas will be low-cost or no-cost items, at least at first.

Be sure you incorporate the organization's mission into the rationale for improvement. Always ask: How will this idea improve our mission capacity?

As you make steady improvements, keep a journal of them. Every month, review with the staff all that the organization has done. You will all be surprised how far you've come. This review keeps you from forgetting that small, steady steps can result in remarkable progress.

4. Incorporate Risk & Innovation into Your Value Structure.

Since risk and innovation are essential partners in providing excellent service, you need to develop ways of incorporating this belief into your policies and documents.

One way to do so is to formalize the idea of innovation and risk in your staff evaluations. Add to your evaluation criteria a question along the following lines: What new idea, policy, service, or organizational improvement has this person

been responsible for during the evaluation period? If you give certain criteria more weight than others, consider giving this criterion fairly heavy weight, making it a priority. The idea is to let staff members see that you value innovation and that if they get on the innovation express, they'll be rewarded. (Note: If you don't have a formal evaluation process, you need one, and soon!)

It's also a good idea for your organization's statement of values to include your belief that innovation and change, consistent with your mission, are inherently good things. This statement again underscores your commitment to steady improvement in the way you provide services.

Adopting innovation as a key value means incorporating it into your organization at all levels. It means rewarding, not punishing, people for taking risks. An example is provided by a parochial high school that taught "higher-order thinking," which emphasizes solving problems in new ways. At a planning retreat, a student on the planning committee asked, "How come you want us to be inventive but you never try anything new? If it's not in the rules and protocols, it doesn't happen." Fortunately, the faculty realized the inconsistency and began to embrace more innovation and higher-order thinking themselves. It wasn't easy, but it was essential.

5. Keep Close to Your Values.

Most change is good, but some is not. As you evaluate your options in improving your organization, don't get so enamored of trends, technology, or keeping up with peer organizations that you lose the core sense of what your organization stands for.

One of the more ubiquitous examples of technology, for example, is the automated phone system. You know the kind; the phone is answered by a machine that says, "Press 1 for a staff directory, press 2 for a listing of services, press 3…" and on and on. Nearly everyone despises these systems, yet they are everywhere. Your organization may even have one.

Why? You hate these systems, yet you made the decision to subject anyone trying to reach you to this torture of technology. And you did it, if you are like most organizations, to "keep up." But in changing to keep up, you simply angered the people you serve.

All of which is to say: Think before you change. Consider before you commit money, time, and your reputation. Ask yourself: Does this change make your organization more mission-capable?

6. Examine Yourself.

When staff come to you with an idea, do you listen or dismiss it (even if only in your mind)? Are you a creature of rigid habits, always arriving at work at the same time, having lunch at the same place, driving the same route? When was the last time you tried a new breakfast cereal, a new restaurant, a new magazine? Once you've decided on something, is that it, or are you open to suggestions, to midcourse corrections?

If your answers to these questions aren't very compelling, your staff probably doesn't see you as very flexible. And you can't lead a flexible organization if you aren't flexible in your own thoughts, actions, and words.

Of course, you must set certain limits. These can guide not just you but your entire organization. As always, fall back on the mission of your organization to help you set those limits.

7. Lower Resistance to Change.

One of the worst management "truths" of recent years is the common "knowledge" that people resist change. The truth is that poorly led people resist change. Well led people not only accept change but may even embrace it. To keep your organization flexible and lead people through change, remember these facts:

People are more likely to go through change with you than for you. Don't just inflict a change on your staff and leave. Let them know you will be going through the change with them.

Assure them that you'll get them the information, equipment, training, encouragement, and support they need to get the change done.

All change is local. No matter how wonderful and selfless your staff is, they will reduce every change to this question: How does it affect me? Their concerns will be for their job, their work hours, their dress code, their need for training, their ability to continue on the same team or in the same office, and so on. Until you can address these issues and allay their concerns, your team members will understandably not put themselves fully into implementing the change. Ignore the local nature of change at your peril.

Change takes time, patience, and support. All change is behavioral. It takes time to get used to and to get right. Be patient, coach your people through the change, and be there to support them when they need it.

As a leader, you must help your organization be more flexible within the limits of your mission and values. Flexibility is a core component of marketing, of meeting your constituents' ever-changing wants, and of remaining an excellent provider of services. It is a crucial part of your leadership skills. How can you stretch yourself, your staff, and your organization today? ∎

Selected References

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These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, www.snpo.org.

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Ideas to Encourage a Flexible Organization

"Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand." The motto of Meet the Wilderness, specializing in youth adventure education programs since 1974 (www.meetthewilderness.org), highlights the organization's commitment to helping young people learn critical life management skills. The organization has survived because it has adapted to changing conditions and created a flexible culture. Try these ideas to foster a flexible culture in your organization:

• **Take your staff to lunch,** and as a learning experience, have everyone order something new off the menu. Then talk about what they liked and didn't like about the experience.

• **Have everyone in your management team** take a different route to work one day a week, and don't fuss at them if they're late. Ask them what they saw that was new, interesting, or surprising. If a new route was stressful, why? What could have relieved the stress? (Usually the answer is "a navigator," which supports the point that it helps to go through change with other people.)

• **If you're a business-suit-and-dress organization,** try a casual day. If you're a casual organization, have a day for wearing coats and ties or business suits or dresses. Talk about what was good and bad about the change.

• **Have your staff or board members sit at different places** at their meetings (you too!) Talk about what they notice about each other, about the room, and about the meeting from a different perspective.

• **Go away as a team.** Once a year, take your management team away from the office for a day. Spend part of the day working, planning, and discussing the coming year and how your organization can improve. Spend part of the day socializing, perhaps over lunch or dinner, with no work allowed. Then spend part of the day playing together. Play miniature golf, bowl, go for a hike in the park, or do anything that lets people spend time together and get to know each other better. At the end of the day, reconvene for a time of reflection. This kind of mini-retreat can do wonders to bond teams and foster innovation.

• **Spend time at the point of service.** Once a month, spend a shift at the line of service. Get out of your office, away from meetings, take off your beeper, and *serve*—directly, in person, with no management layers, no memos, no appointments between you and the people you are there to help. This is a wonderful way to get a new perspective.