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Component Relations

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The Chapter of the Future

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By: *Peggy Hoffman*

Many CR professionals believe components will need to become less structured to succeed in an increasingly unstructured environment. Will your organization be prepared to embrace a chapter approach with fewer rules, downsized boards, and task-oriented teams that meet only as needed?

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What if you could build your chapters from scratch? What would you keep, and what would you toss out? We asked that question of association professionals and volunteers. The responses were surprisingly similar, with a few notable differences.

All respondents asked for reduced paperwork and less red tape. Most asked for easier systems and processes. All asked for clarity on responsibilities and solutions for nagging tasks, including database management, communications, and event planning. All demanded a chapter that was led—not managed. And a few brave volunteers asked for a vision—and an answer to why chapters are there.

Getting Specific

The differences came in the volunteers' demand for removing the structure. They listed a number of negatives—things they chafed at—regarding their current chapter structure:

- Re-inventing the wheel;
- Meetings for the sake of meeting (in compliance with requirements);
- Paperwork (without connection to results);
- Standing committees;
- Lengthy, but required, time commitments;
- Cumbersome systems—from data to financial to requests for assistance.

Respondents specifically asked for several things at the local level:

- Fun;
- Connections;
- Knowledge that they're making a difference;
- Flexibility;
- Balance.

The Balancing Act

The question is: How do we balance those two lists while addressing the concerns of liability, risk management, brand management, and customer service from the national perspective?

The breakthrough for the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID) was when the organization realized that

national and local associations share the same customer: the members. It wasn't about the organizations; it was about the members.

The fundamental question is: What *form* will facilitate the core *function* of the chapter to meet the members' needs? Or, stated slightly differently: What level of structure and support should be imposed by the parent organization to ensure each chapter fulfills its purpose—meeting members' needs— without under- or over-utilizing the volunteer pool available?

The answer lies in determining what will make the difference for members and how to measure success in that—then building the structure that will deliver that answer. In many cases, the structure required isn't much more than a steering committee that gathers to plan and host a series of gatherings, keeps its eyes on the local community and its ear to the ground to discern issues and concerns, and serves as an ongoing communication channel. Some local groups get large enough to warrant more structure. But even the largest need to be nimble enough to associate on the fly.

In the article "[Preparing for the Open-Range Future](#)" in *Association Management*, author Bruce Butterfield noted, "The problem lies in the practice of over-structuring in an increasingly unstructured world." He challenged us to reduce structure to allow members to associate when and how they need and want to do so.

For the chapter of the future, "form following function" will look something like the chart below:

Chapter of the Future – Driven First By Function, Then By Form

Chapter of Today	Chapter of the Future
Chapter Charter	Principals of Affiliation
Board of Directors	NA*
Articles of Incorporation/Bylaws	NA*
Elections	NA*
Standing Committees	Task-Oriented Teams
Regular Meetings	Meet Only As Needed
Bank Account	HQ Funding Pool
Independent, Stand-Alone Data Systems	Centralized Data Collection & Reporting
1-up Communications Systems (e.g., Web, E-mail)	Centralized Communications Systems
Limited Program Management Expertise (Event Planning, Marketing/Comm, Etc.)	Program Management Expertise Highly Supported and/or Provided Directly by HQ
Limited Member Needs Assessment	Needs Assessment Tools & Data , Supplemented and/or Provided Directly by HQ
Awards Based on Activity Rather Than Results	Awards Based on Results Rather Than Activity
Knowledge Uncollected	Knowledge Harvested & Shared

**Some chapters may eventually achieve a financial size that requires some traditional structure, such as a central governing body, incorporation, and formal bylaws.*

Jump-Starting the Next Phase

A number of associations have made changes to their structures along these lines, and an equal number are looking at making substantive changes. We have seen a migration to "alliances" or "chapter-lite" models in the past couple of

years.

The Association of Women in Communications and CPCU, the Chartered Property Casualty Underwriter association, were early adopters of committee-run, less structured chapter models. ASID went a step further when it restructured its chapter program; the organization made a cultural shift, moving the focus from "broken" chapters to members. Its new structure is based on fewer rules, downsized boards, and functionality versus status. ASID has put self-determination in force at the local level.

If you're looking at fixing your broken chapters or simply finding a way to maximize your chapters, consider these questions:

- What do members want from the association?
- Where do they want to access those things?
- For those services they want at the local level, what are they willing to do to get them?

Ask these questions of staff:

- What are you offering to members?
- Where are they provided—locally, nationally?
- Where are they most effectively (and efficiently) provided (locally versus nationally)?
- What is a less restrictive structure needed to deliver those services locally?
- How do we measure success?
- Are we training, recognizing, and rewarding based on those measures of success?

By engaging staff and volunteers to work together to answer these questions, you can have success in creating a chapter that works. Most often a central theme is that the administrative burden is disproportionate to the level of activity appropriate or possible for the chapter. The consequence: Volunteers burn an excessive number of calories meeting irrelevant compliance standards rather than member-centric and size-appropriate performance standards. The result: Volunteers don't step up, and participation goes down.


"We live in a Knowledge Worker Age but operate our organization in a controlling Industrial Age Model that absolutely suppresses the release of the human potential."

—Stephen R. Covey

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