

A Must Read for MRTA Unit Officers

EXTREME MAKEOVER



THE NON-PROFIT EDITION

Ideas for energizing your
MRTA Unit and attracting the
retiree of the 21st Century.

EXTREME MAKEOVER: THE NON-PROFIT EDITION

The following address was given by Stuart Langton, PhD to the National Leadership Conference of NRTA: AARP's Educator Community in Washington, D.C. on September 7, 2008. Dr. Langton is a Senior Fellow at Florida State University and President of Stuart Langton and Associates, a consulting firm through which he has served 500 clients.

We live in a world of rapid social change. A recent story I heard about the journalist Barbara Walters illustrates this point. On a trip to report on cultural changes in the Middle East, she observed in the nation of Dubai, that women walked several steps behind their male partners. When she returned some years later, she observed that women walked several steps ahead of their partners. Observing this dramatic difference in custom, she asked a woman, "What has brought about this marvelous social change?" The woman replied, "Land Mines."

While change is not always what it seems, it seems that change is what people want – particularly in America. As a nation of immigrants, we believe in change, new beginnings, and transformation. Today, notions like re-invention and extreme makeover dominate public consciousness. Just go on-line to Amazon and you can find 30,000 books about reinventing something or other. Or go to the Google website, enter the term "Extreme Makeover" and you will find 3 million references.

Speaking of Extreme Makeover, how many of you have seen the hit TV program "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition?" For those who have not seen this series, in each show a family goes on vacation and during that time a team of designers and craftsmen totally transform their house into a showplace. When the family returns, they are surprised and overwhelmed by the change. Some family members cry, some are speechless, some laugh or cheer, and most bless the results with such words as, "This is a dream come true," or, "I am in awe of this stuff." As an aside, I heard that there has been only one disgruntled homeowner who said, "This looks like a lot more crap to clean up." To which the program's producer responded, "Yes, but at least it is new crap."

Recently, I had a crazy idea about the Extreme Makeover phenomenon. My idea was to create a spin-off called: EXTREME MAKEOVER: THE NON- PROFIT EDITION. For the first program, I could think of no more of a deserving candidate for a complete organizational transformation than a retired educators group. So, today, I hope you might help me on my casting search for the most dilapidated, dysfunctional, and decaying local unit we can find. Now, it is entirely possible that one of your groups could be selected. Indeed, they could become the star of the show if, at minimum, the group possesses the following attributes: their membership has been declining for years, no one knows who they are, no one wants to be an officer, they don't do anything, their programs are boring, and the members can't agree on anything.

At his point, you may ask: what would an extreme makeover of a retired educator's group look like? While I suppose every group would be a little different, let me give you my version based on a study I did last year of a dozen very successful retired educator groups around the country. So, the makeover scenario I am about to give you is not entirely fictional as most of the things I will describe were done by at least one of these groups.

Now, the composite extreme makeover group I want to describe has five visible features that make it attractive to its members and prospective members. The five things that set this group apart have to do with Diversity, Impact, Communication, Quality, and Relationships. Let me briefly describe each of these things.

DIVERSITY: The foremost problem of our hypothetical group, before makeover, was that while the membership got older each year, new members from the baby boom generation were not being attracted. For years, the group acted like the Peanuts comic strip character Charlie Brown who said, "There is no problem too big for us to run away from." Well, turnaround began the day this problem was taken seriously, and three things were done right off the bat to diversify the group and its appeal.

First, 10 presently employed teachers ages 45 to 60 agreed to join members in a workgroup to reinvent the organization. What was learned from the teachers was that they would be attracted to an organization that offered a variety of interesting activities from which they could choose rather than meetings they felt obligated to attend. So, the group decided to reduce the number of regular meetings, to make sure the fewer meetings had exceptional programs, and to create a number of other activities of interest to members such as: hikes, one day service projects, wine and cheese tastings, field trips, dining out events, going to the theatre, and museum visits.

Second, the group adopted a new name since most prospective members were no longer retiring, but were, instead, re-careering through new kinds of work, part time work, or strong volunteer commitments. This took some hard thought to choose a name that would reflect what the group was about and wanted to achieve. The new name selected was the acronym SEAL for *Supporting Educators And Learning* which emphasizes the groups mission to support retired educators, education, and lifelong learning. So, now the community has a Seals group to go with the Lions and the Rotarians.

Third, given the trend to re-career rather than retire, the group opened up membership to anyone with an interest in supporting educators, education, and learning. While public school educators remained a majority, the membership diversified considerably as it increased by 500 percent. This has made it possible for the group to do many more things, to do them well, and to do them on a much greater scale.

IMPACT: Volunteering has always been widespread among retired educators, so it is particularly encouraging to see research that finds that baby-boomers volunteer at rates greater than any other generation; and, further, they are very concerned about the impact of their volunteer service. They want to make a difference. Realizing the importance of this, our extreme makeover group, the SEAL, rebuilt their approach to volunteer service and made it the centerpiece of the organization.

Previously, the group's philosophy of service was to encourage members to do their own thing, and to count the total number of hours all members volunteered annually. While this was not done away with, SEAL added two kinds of volunteer activities through which members work together to maximize their impact. One activity consists of one day "Workdays" that engage members, their families and friends, and interested people from the community, and usually end with a pot-luck supper. Examples of these episodic volunteer projects are an environmental clean-up day, planting a community garden, and building a playground.

The other volunteer group activity is decidedly more in-depth and long-term, and, by choice, is focused on educators, education, or lifelong learning. The first such program of SEAL was to support beginning teachers, through a program called the Educator's Support Network – or ESN, since nearly one-third of new teachers today leave their positions within three years. The group helps new teachers by raising money to give them grants for classroom projects, by providing classroom assistance, through recognition programs, in sponsoring and helping with field-trips, and in obtaining supplies and equipment. An important side benefit of this program is that it gets group members into the schools on a regular basis making it easier to attract new members. So, in this case, what is good service is also good marketing.

COMMUNICATION: Speaking of marketing, this was one the group's weakest areas before the makeover. In fact, this is a rampant problem among groups today since most communicate poorly and people are confused about what the group is and what it does. Even though many retired educator groups try to communicate what they are about, frequently people just don't seem to get the message. In this regard, I am reminded of the story of two widows who were talking about the poor quality of public communication. One said to the other, "You know, I just don't watch TV anymore, there is just too much bad staff and too much sex." Her friend then asked, "What do you mean?" The woman continued: "Well last night I watched this show in which a couple was talking about," and she hesitated and blushed, but then said "mutual benefit." After a moment she continued and asked, "If it is not too personal, did you and your late husband have mutual benefit?" And her friend quickly replied, "Oh no, we had State Farm."

Inadequate communication is no longer a problem for our makeover group. The SEAL takes great pride in the clarity of its content and the range of its communication vehicles that include: a handsome brochure, a quarterly newsletter, and an annual Directory with a description of all activities; a schedule; and the names, addresses, email, and phone number of members. Because the newsletter and directory include advertising, these publications cost nothing and even turn a profit. Also, the group has strong press coverage since the President visits editors at least once a year. Press releases are sent out for every meeting and event, and as often as possible, a photo is included. Reporters are always invited to cover major events, and some have even participated in the volunteer "Workdays" with their friends.

An important step for SEAL has been to also go digital in its communication. While some older members were not keen on this, the officers were convinced by research that this was essential to attracting and retaining baby boomer members. For example, they learned from a Pew Research Foundation report that while only 26% of people over 65 used computers in 2005, 63% of those 50 to 64 did so. They also discovered through a study by Microsoft that a 250% increase is predicted among people 65 to 74 using computers within a decade. Other research revealed that computer use is and will be even higher among educators than almost any other group.

So, our makeover group now has a website and uses email frequently. The website includes information and testimonials for people who may want to become members, an application form for membership, and a place to sign-up to volunteer in one of the group's service projects. There are articles, good pictures of all activities, and a schedule of all events. Also, there are links to the websites of the state REA and the national association, NRTA.

As to email, it is used regularly, but not over-used. Announcements are sent out for each meeting and every event. Minutes are sent out following all meetings. Newsletters are sent on-line as well as in print. Information about advocating for issues relevant to the organization are sent out from

time to time. Members are sent greetings on their birthday. Committee information is distributed. Membership invoices and reminders are sent out for those who have not signed up for automatic annual payment from their checking account or credit card. And, very important, prospective members are sent notes inviting them to attend meetings, events, or to become members.

QUALITY: If there is one important lesson our makeover group has discovered in becoming successful, it is that quality counts, especially when trying to attract baby boom members. These potential members are very discriminating because they have received more marketing messages than any group in history, and because there are some 1.6 million non-profit groups in America competing for their affiliation. So, to win the boomer, you have to adopt the adage of Aristotle that, "Quality is not an act, it is a habit."

While there are a lot of ways of thinking about quality, in non-profit groups like ours, I believe that what I like to call the 4P formula works best. Simply put, the 4P formula seeks quality in programs, products, place, and people. Here is how it works out in the SEAL group.

First, programs need to be top notch, well organized, and well advertised. Among topics that we know to be winners have to do with health (like the Staying Sharp program), finances for seniors, lifelong learning, and trends in education. Having the Superintendent of Schools speak is popular, if the person is a good speaker. Holiday parties with live music are also popular. Many members like to hear about books, hobbies, antiques, history, and travel; but every program has to be good at minimum and memorable at best to maintain a strong following. You have to do your homework in organizing programs.

Second, place counts. People do not like to meet in drab institutional settings. They like to feel special; and Boomers particularly have an aversion for meeting at senior centers. So the SEAL group meets at the Country Club and has very nice meals. Even though the cost is more than where the group met previously, people have been very happy.

Third, products make an important impression on people. So, every publication of our makeover group is very attractive and well written. Also, the website looks very nice and is user friendly.

Finally, people are important in creating an atmosphere of friendliness and fun. This is why the SEAL group has "Greeters" or "Hosts" at every meeting and event, including service activities. These folks make sure everyone is welcomed and that people meet one another.

RELATIONSHIPS: And this leads to last makeover quality I would like you to know about which is the quality of relationships that the group works hard to maintain. If we had a report card, the SEAL would get an A plus under the category "Plays well with others." This begins within the group itself, and then ripples out into relations with others outside of the group.

The actor Henry Winkler once observed that, "Assumptions are the termites of relationships." Well, the SEAL avoids assumptions because the officers have an annual planning workshop in which they review what they want to achieve in five key relationships. These relations are with members, with families and friends of members, with other organizations, with community leaders, and with financial sponsors.

The tone for all relationships is set within the group itself since there are no cliques or feuding factions, and everyone is made to feel welcome and a part of the group. The President is always thinking of small tasks to ask people to do to get them involved. Because there are lots of activities and projects, members are used to working together – which strengthens the bonds between them. Because of this, the fact that there are more activities to be involved in and there are more members, the group does not have a problem finding officers. However, in a number of cases, people prefer to share a position with someone else with whom they have a good working relationship.

In regard to working beyond the membership, the philosophy of SEAL is to collaborate and partner with others whenever possible. Their inclusiveness begins by asking members to bring family members and friends to meetings and activities. Then, agreements are established with other organizations for shared programs and projects. For example, a Staying Sharp program which is open to the entire community is sponsored with the state AARP office and local chapter. A trip is organized each summer for members and current teachers from the School District; and Boy Scouts and Girl Scout join members for an Environmental Clean-up Workday.

Because SEAL may want to advocate on behalf of members and for community support for education, a point is made to maintain strong relationships with community leaders. So each year, either the Superintendent or the Chair of the School Board is asked to speak to the group. And because the group often advocates for its members and for education, meetings are held with the mayor and the local congressman from time to time, and every few years they are among those asked to speak at a community issues forum organized by the group.

Finally, because of the extreme makeover, the once weak group is now larger, active, and visible. As a result, especially because of the impact of community service projects, SEAL has become attractive to business supporters in the community. Ten businesses advertise in the group's directory, newsletters and website; there are two corporate partners for each Workday project; and 20 businesses contribute to the Educator Support Network, the beginning teacher support program. To celebrate these contributions, a Partners Appreciation Picnic is held each year and every supporter is given an award.

Well, folks this ends the preview of our first **EXTREME MAKEOVER: THE NON-PROFIT EDITION**. The only thing I would like to add to this story is something my grandfather, an immigrant from Italy, told me many years ago. He said to me, in his wonderful broken English, "Whena you gotta something important to say, if you can't say it with twoa hands, it is notta so important."

So let me leave you with two pieces of advice if you are interested in an extreme makeover, or, even, some good remodeling.

The first is to take the time to plan for what you want to become, because planning promotes the values, vision, and ideas that lead to success. And second, find partners who share your values and commitment and do the job together. As my grandfather also said, "When you gotta these two a important things, everything, she a, come together."

Grazie.

Stuart Langton can be reached at slangton@mindspring.com