Extreme Makeover: The Non-Profit Edition
The reformation of an Audubon Chapter

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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 an
Audubon Chapter. So, today, I hope you might help me on my casting search for the most dilapidated, dysfunctional, and decaying Audubon Chapter we can find. Now, it is entirely possible that one of your Chapters could be selected. Indeed, they could become the star of the show if, at minimum, the Chapter possesses the following attributes: membership has been declining for years, no one knows who you are, you can’t get younger members to join, no one wants to be an officer, members don’t do anything, programs are boring, and the members can’t agree on anything.

At this point, you may ask: what would an extreme makeover of an Audubon Chapter look like? While I suppose every Chapter would be a little different, let me give you my version based upon some things I have heard about successful Audubon Chapters and some similar grassroots organizations. For lack of a better term, I am going to refer to our extremely made over Audubon Chapter as, ”Chapter A.”

Now, Chapter A 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. I want to share a few things about each of these qualities.

**Diversity:** The foremost problem of our hypothetical Chapter A, 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 started for Chapter A the day it began a strategic planning effort to address the issue of diversifying its membership. Let me summarize three important things that were done and learned in this planning effort.

To begin, Chapter A’s planning process was imaginative and inclusive. In addition to appointing a planning committee and holding several visioning sessions with members, a dozen community leaders from teenagers through baby boomers were asked to advise the Chapter. This group also included a number of people of color and Hispanic origin, since there were few such members in the Chapter, although such folks did constitute 1/3 of the region’s population.

In addition to talking to members and advisers, the Chapter surveyed a group of potential members as well as community officials including the local mayor, school superintendent, and head of
the United Way. As a result of these many conversations, Chapter A learned three very important lessons.

One lesson was that there was great diversity in interests and affiliation preferences among existing and potential members. In particular, there was tension between the degree of interest members had in birds, birding, wildlife, habitats, and conservation policy. There were some who wanted Chapter A to be a birding club and there were others who wanted to be more of an environmental action group, and there were many shades in between. Then, there were some differences between those who valued the Chapter for socializing, education, or service. And further, there were differences among those who were regular active members (about 10%), occasional members, episodic members, and supporters (who in fact were a majority who had little affiliation beyond paying dues.)

Another important learning was that there was great potential for attracting new and younger members, but these potential members showed greater interest in the Chapter’s ability to serve the community and to provide episodic opportunities for them to be involved.

Finally, it was clear from talking with community officials that:

- Audubon had a positive brand image (particularly because of our science-based approach).
- There was a great need in the community for conservation education.
- Audubon was a trusted institution, and could be more of a community leadership institution in bringing people to the table to address critical community environmental issues.

(As an aside to this last finding, a recent study I conducted with a colleague at Florida State University on behalf of the Board of Governors of the State University System of Florida identified the need for trusted mediating institutions in Florida (see “Building Bridges: University Community Service, Engagement and Collaboration,” download at: [http://consensus.fsu.edu/bog-fcrc/index.html](http://consensus.fsu.edu/bog-fcrc/index.html))

These learnings were critical to the makeover of Chapter A because it led the group to develop a new vision of the kind of organization it wanted to become – a more active and diverse service and leadership organization, based on a love of birds and nature, and devoted to conservation values. This new vision is reflected in three strategies that have helped the organization to become more diverse and successful.
First, Chapter A has diversified its monthly meeting programs to achieve a healthy balance between its members, especially, alternating between programs that deal with birds, nature, and conservation policy. Additionally, the Chapter offers some specialized programs beyond monthly meetings that cater to particular interests. Birding field trips are a good example of this, and another example is an annual all day workshop on Nature Adventures in which members make presentations about trips they have taken. Another specialized event is an annual “Conservation Forum” in which the Chapter sponsors a legislative “briefing” for the community regarding major environmental legislation being considered at the local, county, state, and federal levels.

A second important strategy of Chapter A is a commitment to being as intergenerational as possible in all activities. A number of active new members are teachers in local schools and colleges, and they, in turn, often encourage young people to attend meetings, projects, and field programs. On the Annual Christmas Bird Count, a young person is paired with and assists an experienced member.

A related strategy of Chapter A is that, whenever possible, it engages with partner organizations to support and strengthen programs, projects, and events. For example, the Chapter has worked with a group of ministers of Afro-American churches in providing natural history field trips for middle school youth. It has partnered with a Boy Scout troop, a Girl Scout Troop, and the local native plant society in the Backyard Birds Program, an initiative to encourage bird friendly yards.

**Impact:** Beyond becoming a more diverse group, Chapter A has become much stronger in its service activities and, consequently, makes a significant impact on the community. Research has shown that the baby boomers volunteer more than any other generation in history, and Chapter A has attracted many new boomer members through a variety of service activities. Each Fall, for example, on National Public Lands Day, they sponsor an educational “workday” at a state park, including clean-up and restoration activities. Each Spring, the Chapter does a similar project for Earth Day and invites local schools and colleges to partner with them.

The Chapter has also had a big impact on the community by sponsoring three issue forums a year on critical environmental issues. They found it particularly helpful to align the selected topics to state and national Audubon priorities in order to tap into the expertise and resources of the organization. So, for example, last year the forums dealt with habitat restoration, global warming, and
state, county, and national legislative challenges. In keeping with its strategy, the Chapter partnered with its local state university, where it actually held the forum meetings.

One other activity that has attracted great member support and community interest is a biannual “vision review” conducted with elected officials and community leaders on the topic, “Our Environment/Our Future.” The program includes a review, including an “environmental report card” of the community, outlining successes and challenges. The high school, community college, and local branch of the university system participate in this event – which, by the way, is also co-sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce and the local newspaper.

These programs have not only had an impact on the community, they have attracted new members. So, in this case, what has been good service has also been good marketing for the Chapter.

**Communication:** Speaking of marketing, this was one of Chapter A’s weakest areas before the makeover. In fact, this is a rampant problem among many Chapters today since most communicate poorly and people are confused about who they are and what they do. Even though many Audubon Chapters 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 Chapter. Chapter A 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 Chapter 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 Chapter A 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.

So, our makeover Chapter 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 Audubon of Florida and National Audubon.

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. 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 chapter 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 Chapter A.
First, programs need to be top notch, well organized, and well advertised. 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. In fact, for a few years, Chapter A cut back from monthly to bi-monthly meetings until they could assure excellent 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 places like senior centers. Audubon Chapters who own their own facilities are lucky in this regard. Others are fortunate that some members own properties that are quite beautiful places to have meetings now and then. Chapter A occasionally meets at the local 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 Chapter A 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, Chapter A 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, Chapter A 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 Chapter A 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, as mentioned previously, native plant groups, local colleges, an ecumenical clergy group, the Chamber of Commerce, the local paper, and the local Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts are among the many partners of Chapter A.

Because Chapter A may want to advocate on behalf of members and for community support for conservation, a point is made to maintain strong relationships with community leaders. So each year, both the mayor and local Congressman are asked to speak to a Chapter meeting or at one of the community forums. Chapter A really bulks up their audience for these meetings.

Finally, because of the extreme makeover, the once weak Chapter A is now larger, active, and visible. As a result, especially because of the impact of community service projects, Chapter A 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 Community Issue Forums. 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 canta 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 for your Chapter.

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, PhD, is President of Stuart Langton and Associates, a consultancy through which he has assisted over 500 organizations. He is a Senior Fellow at Florida State University. He can be reached at slangton@mindspring.com*