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## **The Groundhog Effect**

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In the film *Groundhog Day*, Phil Connors relives the same day, over and over, until he eventually gets it right. So many associations endure a similar situation without rectifying the repetitive scenario.

The groundhog effect is when an association does the same things but treats the activities as if they are new and never been done before.

Imagine the frustration of volunteer on the conference planning committee. They are assigned responsibilities for menus, speakers, and registration. They begin by asking, “Is this the first time this conference has been planned or are their records from last year’s committee?” (In fact, it was the 15<sup>th</sup> annual conference.)

Similar frustrations happen to staff. Let’s say the annual installation ran perfectly last year. When it is time to plan again, there are no records. Everything must be done from memory or start anew.

This is also true for staff who face the continuous turnover of volunteers. The lack of documented steps and work product causes wasted time.

To operate more effectively and efficiently, documents should be maintained and passed along from year to year. Structure should not be perceived as limiting but rather liberating. Volunteers don’t want to waste time reinventing the wheel of existing processes. Documentation ensures effective programs and events with room for improvement.

## **Cyclical Processes**

Associations are cyclical, meaning they repeat their activities and responsibilities annually or quarterly. For instance, annual nominations and elections, the yearly budget process, annual awards, and conference. Quarterly, the board meets, financial reports and newsletters. There should be few or no surprises (groundhogs popping up) when processes and best practices are documented.

In the book *E-Myth Revisited*, author Michael Gerber urges organizations to “work smarter, not harder.” He offers, “If you are disorganized, your business will be disorganized.”

The concept applies to associations, create systems and best practices. Document the processes to guide future volunteers and staff. The cyclical nature of an association or chamber allows the development of an operations guide for every activity and event.

Call it the standard operating procedures (SOP) manual to promote consistency and sustainability.

**Checklists** – You would not want to fly on a plane where the pilots did not have a checklist to ensure a safe and direct flight. The same tool can be used in associations.

For example, at the annual conference one would not want to forget anything. Has the appropriate AV equipment been ordered and tested? Is the registration desk prepared to welcome attendees with all the tools it will need? Without a checklist something as simple as nametags, easels, and staplers can be overlooked and cause problems.

As an event is planned, the volunteers and staff should document every step. Challenge them to make best practices to improve upon the steps.

Assemble all the lists regarding the conference in a conference planning manual. Imagine how next year's planning committee will be more efficient with these checklists and be able to avoid the pitfalls of the prior year.

The book *Checklist Manifesto* can benefit associations. Author Atul Gawande analyzes the use of checklists for greater efficiency and consistency.

**Scripting** – Another efficient tool is scripting and building on the same script year after year. Events should be well planned and stay on time.

Everyone can recall a meeting when a member got up to the microphone to present an award and then hijacked the podium to ramble for 30 minutes. Those who fear speaking (glossophobia), either fumble at the microphone or ironically refuse to relinquish it.

Help the presenter by providing a script. This ensures no one accidentally forgets to mention a key sponsor or runs off on a tangent. Scripts can be proofed and rehearsed prior to the event. For annual events, the same script can be used each year and tweaked. Few audiences will recognize the previous script if it has been updated for this year.

**Governing Documents** – Bylaws and policies are not boring tools to store on a shelf, they are guides for leadership and staff. They should be in good order.

Bylaws are broader, usually requiring a vote of the membership to change. Bylaws and policies serve distinct purposes. Learn how to manage and make best use of these governing documents.

If the last review of the documents was more than a few years ago, appoint a task force of volunteer leaders and staff to review content, aided by legal counsel. The documents must be followed and enforced. Check for missing policies, such as addressing conflicts and avoiding antitrust violations.

Over time policies may become obsolete. They are the wisdom of prior boards to guide future leaders on how to handle situations. Policies are easier to amend than the bylaws.

The opposite are bylaws full of clutter and outdated, or policies hidden in older minutes but never assembled in a leadership manual. Keep a well-designed leadership manual ready as a guide for board members.

**Manuals** – One way to organize an association is by establishing and keeping manuals. They can be hardcopy or virtual manuals stored on a shared accessible site.

Consider a leadership manual for the board, a procedures manual for staff, a communications guide, a crisis management guide, conference planning and a policy manual. Once the manuals are established, they are easy to keep up to date. The manuals support training, consistent operations, and succession of staff.

**Staff Respect** – Professional staff are the constant in an association. As volunteers transition, the staff keep things moving forward. If the board and committees set the vision, staff will advance the outcomes.

The staff should not face surprises from volunteer leaders. They are not there to advance the legacy or whims of the board.

They should know what to expect in their roles without having responsibilities changed with each administration's desires. Remember the adage, "staff manage, and board govern."

Volunteers should maintain a professional collegial relationship with staff. They do not have a direct line for telling them what to do or advising on their daily duties. Staff work under the purview of the executive director or CEO.

In summary, groundhogs have no place in an association. Avoid surprises and volunteer disappointment by developing sustainable systems. Document the best practices to be efficient and effective – avoiding the groundhog effect.

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**Note:** Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at [www.nonprofitcenter.com](http://www.nonprofitcenter.com). Sarah Gustafson, ABR®, SRES®, CRS, serves as Dean of the Massachusetts Association of REALTORS® Leadership Academy and is past president of the REALTOR® Association of Central Massachusetts.

