

Seeing A Chapter Slowdown? Are Your Leaders Skipping Meetings?



Every association chapter has slow periods. The exact reasons may be different, but it's typically in the winter when it's too cold for members to leave the house, during busy school times for those with children and even just when people have a lot going on at work. During these times, no matter how hard you try to make your event the one you think people will choose, it often isn't.



When a chapter event, or series of events, doesn't deliver as expected, financially or in terms of attendance, does your board accept it as a normal part of chapter life and move to the next item on their To Do list? Or do they take the time to understand what went wrong?

Chapter inactivity may be a clear sign that something you're doing, or not doing, needs to change. And, only once you understand the root cause can you change the outcomes for the better. Maybe the event was at the wrong time? The wrong place? Or the speaker wasn't one people were clamoring to hear?

But if you ask those who attended and those who didn't, and what you hear is predominately positive, what could have affected the outcome? When engagement dips, it's time to consider something your board may not want to address: a lack of board presence at your events. Are your chapter board members as involved and visible as they need to be? Or do they do what many board

members do, the high-level brainstorming and planning, and leave the execution to others, waiting at home to hear how things went?

If it's more of the latter, your chapter could be suffering from "board invisibility." Read on to understand the impact board member absence can have on chapters. Learn how to explain the importance of event attendance to your board and ways to make it easier for them to attend.

The cost of an out-of-touch board: more than money

Unfortunately, some board members don't see themselves as part of a chapter's volunteer program. Their thoughts are more along the lines of "I'm a board member, not a volunteer."

When board members don't believe they're part of your core volunteer group, the chapter suffers. Of course, you lose the money you would have made from event attendees, who don't come because they don't believe your board sees your events as important. But you also lose some of the member engagement you work so hard to cultivate.

Board member attendance and active participation in chapter events improves connection and ensures everyone feels valued, while improving engagement with the chapter's mission. And there's science to back that up.

Social Learning Theory shows that people pattern their behavior after those they admire, and they participate in activities and join groups that reinforce that behavior. Whether your board sees it or not, your members are looking to them for cues, for that feeling of "if they're doing it, I'll do it too." And the cues they're looking for are more than just seeing board members standing around checking their phones. They want to see board commitment to the chapter, which translates to members that they should also be committed and engaged.

Getting leaders in the door

Start by sharing the science behind Social Learning Theory. Apply it to your chapter with real examples, like the number of people you expect at your last networking event versus how many registered, and how many showed up.



It's also time to get creative. Think of all the different things you tried during the height of COVID that made it easier and more interesting for the board, and your general membership, to attend. Consider a few events each quarter that aren't full-length, full-agenda meetings. Try virtual happy hours, speed networking, listening sessions, Coffee Chats and virtual one-on-ones, all low-pressure settings that can be valuable to the board.

Instead of requiring every board member to be at every meeting, set up a rotating schedule and/or ask for volunteers to attend your different event types. And tell your leaders that, unless it's a meeting on a specific topic, they don't need to prepare anything ahead of time. They just need to model the behaviors you want to see in members and member guests. This means they should listen, smile, say hi and act genuinely interested; remind them to put away their phones.

Provide a question or two board members can use to start conversations, like "what's your top priority this week?" or "what's something that would make your job easier?" Just remind them to be able to answer the same question. Give them a point of information to share, like the status of important issue in your industry or even just the date and topic of your next speaker series.

Ask members what they want from chapter leadership

As with everything that involves your chapter membership, don't assume you know what's best. Once you realize the absence of board members is affecting your chapter, ask them what they want and need from your board.

Do they want to:

- See faces and know the board values them as members?
- Ask questions?
- Discuss work or chapter challenges?

From that information, you can identify one small, achievable next step, like holding a speed networking event with the board, or creating a board role for a VP of new membership. Be sure to share with members how their input helped you better connect them with the board. And increase attendance.

Inactivity is when leadership matters most



Association chapters don't become irrelevant at once. Irrelevance disappears over time, often through something as simple as the silence and absence of your board. This also means that the opposite is true. Once you get board leaders more involved in chapter activities, it'll take time for members to react. Change doesn't happen overnight, so if you don't see change immediately, keep the process going.

The presence of chapter board members will go a long way toward restarting and improving the momentum and engagement you've lost.

