



Spear Carriers for Change: The NAPEO Story

The key to transforming your board? Create a platoon of spear carriers.

By Brian Fayak, Art Geiger, & Doug Eadie

The place: a hotel ballroom in Tampa, Florida. **The non-profit:** the National Association of Professional Employer Organizations (NAPEO). **The participants:** the NAPEO board, executive team, and steering committee. **The purpose:** Steering committee presentation of recommendations to strengthen NAPEO board leadership. **The outcome:** overwhelming board approval of a detailed “board governing mission” laying out a new board structure consisting of five standing committees: board operations; planning and development; performance oversight and monitoring; stakeholder relations; and audit functions.

Defying the Odds

Getting the governing mission and committee structure approved was anything but a slam dunk. The process of change is daunting to the normal person, who doesn't welcome the “opportunity” to fail at doing something new. And you don't want to underestimate people's ego attachment to familiar processes. The challenge facing the NAPEO steering committee was even stiffer because they were proposing major change, asking the board to embrace a more proactive decision-

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making role after years of little strategic discussion and planning. In addition, they were recommending brand-new governing committees to replace old, traditional ones.

So how did the steering committee beat the odds and secure approval for such dramatic change? In a nutshell, the six board members (five current and one past) on the steering committee served as ardent change champions and spear carriers for the recommended changes. This is their story.

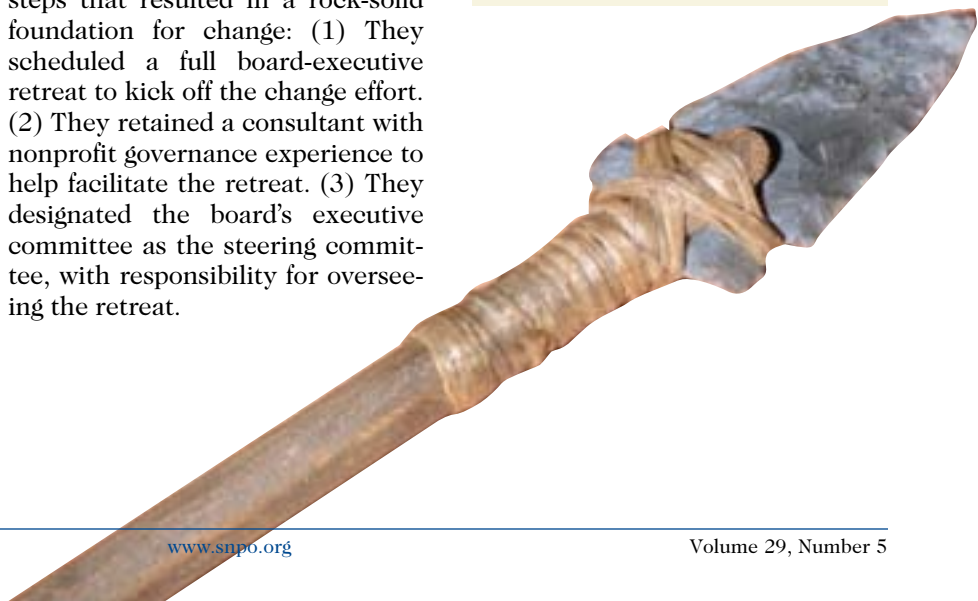
Laying the Foundation

The NAPEO board chair, vice-chair, and second vice-president—with support from others on the executive committee—took three steps that resulted in a rock-solid foundation for change: (1) They scheduled a full board-executive retreat to kick off the change effort. (2) They retained a consultant with nonprofit governance experience to help facilitate the retreat. (3) They designated the board's executive committee as the steering committee, with responsibility for overseeing the retreat.

To assure that the spear carriers who would lead the charge—members of the steering committee—became true owners of the process, the consultant interviewed them, along with key members of the organization, one-on-one via telephone. He then prepared an agenda for the retreat and reviewed it with steering committee members, who decided how to assign participants to breakout groups.

The retreat was designed to achieve three main objectives: familiarize board and staff with developments in the rapidly changing field of nonprofit governance; generate consensus on governance issues facing NAPEO and ways to address the issues; and build receptivity to change. The use of six breakout groups (three meeting concurrently

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Steering committee members served as ardent change champions.

in each of two rounds) led by steering committee members ensured the generation of substantial content, fostered participation, and enlivened the day's deliberations, while also reinforcing the ownership of steering committee members.

Spear-Carrier Follow-Through

The daylong retreat achieved its objectives. Although not all board members became passionate change champions, the great majority agreed that the board's governing role needed to be clarified and its governing structure updated.

Now the spear carriers on the steering committee needed to translate this intent into concrete action. With consulting assistance, they fashioned recommendations into a report. Realizing that the report wouldn't speak for itself, they planned how to share responsibility for presenting the recommendations to the full board, anticipating likely questions and discussing how to address them. They agreed that any member of the steering committee could chime in at any time during the presentation and that the consultant would serve as a backup resource and contribute only when called upon by one of the spear carriers.

The three recommendations requiring action at the board meeting were to adopt the board's new governing mission; put the new committee structure in place; and extend the steering committee's life for as long as it would take to establish the new committees. There was sweeping approval for all three

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recommendations, and the meeting ended with a feeling of solidarity and celebration.

Lessons You Can Apply

Any nonprofit can use the four lessons learned from this process:

- Turning several influential board members into change champions who'll take the lead in convincing their board colleagues to embrace governance change is far likelier to succeed than merely putting a consultant or CEO in charge.
- An effective way to transform board members into spear carriers is to involve them in a committee with a formal, substantive role in shaping changes.
- Building full board understanding of governance issues and fostering an appetite for improvement through a mechanism such as a retreat will make adoption of change more likely.
- A consultant can be helpful in accomplishing transformation but only in a supportive role, not as the driver of change. Board members are likelier to listen to their colleagues than to a "hired gun."

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Continue Your Journey of Change

For more on leading change in your organization, see these *Nonprofit World* articles, available at www.snpo.org/members:

- **Leading and Managing Governance Change** (Vol. 26, No. 3)
- **Can Standing Committees Contribute to High-Impact Governing?** (Vol. 25, No. 2)
- **Five Golden Rules for Board-Exec Retreats** (Vol. 26, No. 1)
- **Adapt to Change to Survive** (Vol. 24, No. 2)
- **Secrets to Finding the Perfect Consultant** (Vol. 28, No. 3)

NAPEO at a Glance

A nonprofit corporation organized as a membership association, the National Association of Professional Employer Organizations (NAPEO) is the largest trade association for professional employer organizations (PEOs) worldwide. Professional employer organizations enable clients to outsource the management of human resources, employee benefits, payroll, and workers' compensation. A PEO delivers these services by establishing and maintaining an employer relationship with the employees at the client's worksite and by contractually assuming certain employer rights, responsibilities, and risk. The PEO industry is relatively youthful, going back only 30 years or so, and growth has been quite robust. At the present time, an estimated 700 PEOs are serving clients in the United States.