

Reinvigorating the YMCA's National Network

Neil Nicoll, president emeritus of the [YMCA of the USA](#) (Y-USA), recently talked with Bridgespan Partner Kelly Campbell about his 40-plus year career with the organization. Named president and CEO in 2006, Nicoll led Y-USA through a multidimensional effort to improve the organization's performance. He shared his thoughts about that transformation, the challenges of managing a large network, and the promising role of such networks in the future of social change. Here, we offer highlights from his conversation with Campbell.

Recapturing the Y's early passion

We had this massive organization that had been founded in the 1850s as a small movement around saving the lives of young men who were moving from the farms to the cities. From 1880 to 1920, a thousand cities in this country built YMCAs. And as time went on, the organization did what most—not most, all—movements do to survive. It morphed into an institution.

When you think about universities, hospitals, nonprofits, and others, they invariably get to a place where their highest priority, whether they're willing to admit it or not, is protecting the institution. That was us. But we felt that if we could take the heft of our 900 associations—serving 22 million people in the United States with a quarter of a million staff and over half a million volunteers—we could make significant social change. That change would come if we could get everyone moving in the same direction, and if we could recapture the passion—the sense of being part of a movement—that the organization had when it was founded.

Market research showed us how we were perceived by the public, and it was sobering. We found that 98 percent of people in this country knew our name and 92 percent loved us, which was great. But the researcher also said, "We've been doing this research for 40 years, and we have never seen a larger disconnect between the staff and volunteer leadership and the public's perception of what you're doing and why you do it. To you, you're changing people's lives. To the public, you're a

place where they sign up for swim lessons or gym.” We had become this institution that was about activities for the sake of activities. We were able to explain clearly “what we did” but people didn’t have an answer to the more important question, “so what.” They were good activities; don’t misunderstand me. But then we asked: “Why are we doing this, and where can we have greater impact?”

Making the mission real

Going into this effort, our cause was “We strengthen communities,” and we had three focus areas: healthy living, youth development, and social responsibility. But in those areas, what did we want to be known for? What would galvanize our associations?

In the area of healthy living, to take just one example, we decided to concentrate on diabetes prevention because it is a huge health issue in this country. If we were going to position the YMCA as an organization that is serious about improving the nation’s health, we had to show that we could take on a big, tough health issue. Our diabetes prevention programs are ramping up—not as fast as we might like, but we’re making good progress. We can reverse pre-diabetes in 56 percent of participants, and that has huge cost benefits for the country. We have become the first nonprofit, community-based organization in the country with our own Medicare reimbursement code and the first that has a health insurance system that reimburses us for providing these programs. We want to be part of creating health-care systems for the future.

Challenges of transformation

The first would be just the **basic inertia** that’s present in a large organization that is paying its bills and getting along just fine, thank you very much. If we hadn’t asked the questions, we could have been comfortable, but that’s all. Making ourselves uncomfortable was what was necessary.

Self-interest is another challenge. Within staff and volunteer leadership, we are encouraging YMCA’s to consolidate, be more efficient. But then you find volunteer leaders who balk, who politely say, “My grandfather was board chairman of this YMCA. My father was board chairman of this YMCA, and by God, I’m going to be board chairman of this YMCA. It’s our YMCA, and we’re not going to consolidate. How could you think people would drive [from one town to another] to share a Y?” We have to get leadership to look at how they can increase impact versus protecting a comfortable structure. Let form follow function.

There’s leadership and staff self-interest too. If you’re 59 years old and you’re going to retire at 65, do you want to go through all these headaches?

Getting funders to appreciate that in fact you can transform a large network to offer solutions to big social problems is also a challenge. When you have data and

you can show results, that makes a difference, but this challenge is ongoing, and it's not insignificant.

And finally, **having patience** is hard. Everyone wants to see results quickly. Giving things time to work themselves through when you're making these big network transformations is not an insignificant challenge.

Justifying a new fee structure

We then went through the whole governance process change where we made nine constitutional changes that gave Y-USA, our national office, greater authority to hold people to higher standards. We also changed our fee structure to better support the national organization so we could increase services to local associations. We were successful because every change we made had to be voted on by our constituents, and we involved them in all plan development. With an 83 percent positive vote, we doubled the dues of many of our associations. It passed because we had gotten to the place where they believed that what we were doing had value, and where we were proposing to go was where they wanted to go.

Letting the work get done

Once you've come to agreement on what you're trying to get done, then it's time to step back and let people do their jobs. There are multiple ways to accomplish a task. But ask yourself: If you're going to make everybody do it your way, then why aren't you the only one on the staff?

Being able to talk with people in person also is important. Building relationships across the organization is important. We encourage our staff to get out of the Chicago office and get into the local associations. Our chief marketing officer has two or three constituency groups of CMOs around the country. Our senior staff has had a lot of exposure to our board of directors because I wanted the board to have confidence that there was continuity between what I was telling them and what the staff would tell them.

Changing lives

There's one thought that I always hope is there when somebody participates with the YMCA—that somewhere 20-plus years out, they'll come to this realization: "You know, it was a good decision that I joined the YMCA. It's made a real difference in my life."

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