

Local Chamber Best Practices

Transcript of Discussion,
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Moderator: **Leonard Loboda**, Senior Manager, specializes in Productivity Improvement out of the Winnipeg office of Grant Thornton LLP. Leonard is a strategist and attains market leadership while focusing on training and leadership development for a sustainable culture of continuous improvement.

Panelist: **Brenda L. Storey** is Executive Director of the Winkler & District Chamber of Commerce, having been a committed member of the Winkler Chamber Executive for 8 years. Her s community leadership includes, Pembina Manitou Community Development Corporation, Winkler Community Development Corporation, Winkler & District Health Care Board as well as several Sports and fund raising committees.

Brenda also has 20 years of Sales and Marketing experience in a Leadership role

Panelist: **David Angus** has held the position of President and CEO at The Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce since June 1999. In his role as President and CEO David has represented The Chamber on numerous committees and panels including the City of Winnipeg's Red Tape Commission, both the Image and Competitiveness task forces of the Premier's Economic Advisory Council, the Employer of Choice task force, and the Community Liaison Committee for the Canadian Blood Services.

Panelist: **Dan Overall** is Director of Policy and Communications for the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce. In that capacity Dan drafts and oversees the MCC's policy positions. He has made submissions to both the federal and provincial levels of government and has represented the MCC on a wide array of committees including the Trade Advisory Group, the President's Advisory Council For Literacy and the Winnipeg and Region Cluster Steering Committee.

Question: We are primarily a grassroots movement and we have heard today that a lot of members would like some type of board governance or tips or information on how to run a meeting. Would all the local chambers be kind enough to communicate to the Manitoba Chambers their best practices in terms of how they run their local organizations so that we can collect them and maybe provide them as an overview for everybody to access as a resource?

The second thing is I like all this talk about strategic planning. That is so crucial. We all have to be singing from the same song sheet and knowing where we are going and it was nice to hear all that going on today. But how do we make sure this continues to come together?

David Angus: How does it all come together? I think it comes together here, actually. This is the vehicle through which we should be pulling together joint strategy. One of the

things we have to figure out is every community is different but every community needs a strategy. I think we can come together around a process and the Manitoba Chambers can play a huge role in terms of how we communicate with each other, how we collect information, and how we disseminate it. And if it is all around a strategic planning process it would just make our own strategic plans that much stronger.

We have to use this conference, frankly, on an annual basis to do that type of coordination.

I am involved with the Canadian Chamber Executives and governance is always the number one issue. The number one thirst for local chambers in terms of knowledge is job descriptions, the role of the Board, the role of the CEO. There is some great information on the CEC website. It's an ongoing discussion and we certainly want to use this conference to do that.

Question: I think we have to backtrack from policy and objectives and all that and just get back to the basic questions that a lot of the small chambers have. There are a lot of chambers here that aren't incorporated. I think a) we need a chairman's handbook, b) we need one or two pages of Robert's Rules of Order and c) I think that every chamber that is here, if we could just email or mail in our by-laws/constitutions into the Manitoba Chambers and then they could divide them into small (e.g. Falcon Lake/West Hawk), medium (e.g. Morden and Winkler) and large chambers (Winnipeg and Brandon). Then we could develop a template, come up with a generic constitution for each size of chamber and then each chamber can tweak it as they wish.

Question: Just a couple of comments on how we bring people onto the same page even within the same community. In Russell the town has just gone through a strategic planning session as has the chamber. What excites me about the whole process is in the town's strategic plan the very last point demonstrates an appreciation and concern for the evolution of the tourism industry.

The chamber of commerce has gone through the same process and it has elevated tourism from a lower priority to the number one priority.

Finally, we are at the stage where we are attracting new businesspeople to Russell and working diligently to bring the business community to an understanding of tourism's potential.

I am excited by that because over the five or ten years with the evolving reality on the commercial side and the important benefits that are flowing to the town on the public sector side it is going to gain a higher priority and the interest of the private sector and the public sector may well come closer together because it is based on a partnership between the two.

Question: Dave, you are on the Canadian Chamber committee that is reviewing their strategic plan, the Winnipeg Chamber is reviewing its strategic plan, we have three different levels of chamber here all trying to figure out how to work together. What have you learned there that you can share with us here?

David Angus: I have learned that we are an extremely dysfunctional organization. To the Canadian Chamber's credit they are starting to recognize that challenge. Here's the issue, the Winnipeg Chamber is developing a three-year plan. We did not even look at the Canadian Chamber's strategic plan as an input into our plan. I have asked other local chambers the same thing and it didn't even occur to them to do that. As an organization we need to start linking together at the strategic level.

The Canadian Chamber has wasted this unbelievable national resource that is unique to the chamber movement, this grassroots movement that has strength in every community across the country. We have communications strength, relationships with government, media strength and private sector engagement that are not being utilized at all.

Imagine what could be possible for the Canadian Chamber by doing one national campaign. Pick one big issue nationally and engage the whole network on the same day to mobilize their community and have a discussion about that one issue. Imagine the power of that. And we don't do that at all because we just aren't linked.

We need to start thinking about a different way for the chamber to start adding value to the national discussion about where the economy is headed.

Perrin Beatty, who is the CEO of the Canadian Chamber, had a good comment in the Canadian Business magazine when it did a story on the national economy. He said we are a country that has 12 different economic strategies – ten provincially and two territorially. We have no national economic plan that brings us together as a country. There is only one organization that can facilitate that development, and that's the chamber of commerce. There is no other organization that can bring together a national perspective while still respecting regional differences.

Wouldn't it be great? We spend one day of the year talking about hockey, maybe we can spend one day talking about the economy.

We need to start taking about how we can leverage the strengths of this movement and we need to start having that conversation in this province as well.

I think the 'Have' Province Agenda is absolutely a step in the right direction. It is an objective that we can all rally around.

One thing that is very powerful is when different groups target a common objective and measure themselves against that objective, because it forces collaboration. I think we need to have these discussions. What can we all work on together? We are facing the

same issues, let's work on it together, leverage our strengths and make a huge difference when it comes to our community.

I think the Canadian Chamber is starting to move that way and hopefully we will see some progress at that level.

Question: If the idea here is planning for the future I would like to hear from the panel as to how you would recommend that the Boards of the chambers in the rural communities look at getting people of the younger generation on the Board because we bring lots of value yet we aren't always welcome.

Brenda Storey: One of the first things you should do is always have youth on the executive. We achieve that by working with our local high schools. By having youth on the executive we can really learn a lot about what is happening to them and what their thoughts and ideas are and that just filters all the way to the young entrepreneurs as well.

We need to show value to the young entrepreneurs that the chamber is a resource centre for them and will help them with their businesses.

David Angus: I agree and I think one thing that attracts young people is other young people. To be able to allow young people to interact, socialize and work with other young people is very important to chambers that want to attract them.

I think we can do a better job of understanding the value sets of the next generation. That is one of the reasons we started our high school program, because it is a totally different value set for the next generation and if you want to attract youth we have to project those same kinds of values. So engagement with youth and where youth are found, in terms of post-secondary and high school, is very important.

I think another important element is a lot of young entrepreneurs are looking for mentorship. They would look to the chamber, so how do we structure that in an effective way? That is a weakness of the Winnipeg Chamber's that we need to address and it has been difficult to figure out how to structure programs that will allow that to happen.

And remember we are battling an issue because youth do not want to belong to an organization that their mom or dad belonged to. You need to understand that barrier and figure out how to reinvent yourself.

I know one thing that is very popular throughout North America in terms of chambers is the young professional groups. It's a big part and a growing part of the chamber movement.

Dan Overall: I think one key is you as a Board have to really clamp down that you want it. You have to sell yourself on the fact that it isn't just one of these twenty other things that we say we are kind of going to do so it is a half-hearted effort. You have got to

convince yourself that this is really important, and get really passionate about it because if it becomes a front and centre issue that will drive your experimenting with ideas and following through.

Question: When is the last time we have had a chair of the Canadian Chamber from Manitoba? I remember when Lloyd McGinnis was chair and Lloyd challenged the whole way the Canadian Chamber had operated and put into place, with a whole lot of effort, a program which tried to lift the Canadian Chamber of Commerce. Maybe we should champion a Manitoba born and bred successful business person to be in that position?

When I came into the chamber movement in the early seventies through the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce was nothing, it was a branch office of the Canadian Chambers of Commerce in Manitoba. Beginning in about 1983 the evolution started towards the strength of the chamber movement and I was delighted to hear David on behalf of the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce speak about the importance of this annual meeting and its potential to do so much.

And I congratulate you for raising the issue about reforming the Canadian of Commerce because I don't think it, unlike the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce which has evolved and grown in strength commitment and contribution, has not yet realized its fundamental value added which you described. I think that we can help contribute that because I am not sure there is any other provincial chamber throughout this country that has attained the level of achievement and realization of values that the Manitoba Chambers and local chambers realize.

David Angus: I will say this, Perrin Beatty is a great man and I think he is on a mission to reinvent the Canadian Chamber. I am very hopeful that we are going to see some fundamental change there and the people around the strategic planning table are very much on the same page. I am as hopeful as I have ever been that we are going to see a reinvented Canadian Chamber that is actually going to add value to the things that we are doing and to the things that the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce is doing as well.

Question: I guess I agree with everything I have heard here, but I want to speak particularly to the comment another questioner made. We are various sizes of chambers, varying make-ups. I am not here to say poor us we don't even have a paid member on our staff, but that is our reality, that's the structure. There are a lot of great ideas here and we have all had our successes. Without making it too onerous there needs to be a vehicle to share success and I appreciate that may have a different definition from chamber to chamber.

We don't have a 32 member Board or staff members. Maybe we have a focus group that brings together ideas, but we all have our places of work that we need to go back to so who is going to put it all together and send it in to the Manitoba Chambers? I guess I am asking myself the question as much as anything, how do we share those ideas?

Dan Overall: It's the old adage, 'how do you eat an elephant? A bite at a time.' I think this is a good start, confirming at this AGM the spirit of what we want to accomplish. It can start off, as was mentioned, with the Manitoba Chambers gathering the by-laws, constitutions and the strategic plans and breaking them down so you can access them on the website.

And then we continue a dialogue, hopefully throughout the year, where we target other issues and then get a blog so that when you have an issue you can send it out through the chamber blogosphere and say 'hey, I am struggling with this has anybody got an insight, can you help me out?' and start committing to sharing that information on an ongoing basis. That will then build momentum where we can have the AGM take it to the next step.

We are very close to almost reinventing the wheel at each AGM. We'll say 'hey, this is great, let's commit to sharing information through the year' and then at the next AGM it's more of the same. We need to have AGMs where we can say 'look at what we did last year, look at the momentum we generated. We are headed in the right direction here is how we can improve upon it or here is a challenge we found and here is what we are doing to address it.'

Question: I just want everyone to pick up their handbook and look at the back. On there you'll notice that this year we are taking back control of the Manitoba Business Awards. I know that some local chambers already have a smaller version of this in their own community. After these Annual General Meetings we have a debriefing session and we say 'what were the take aways and what do we want to accomplish?' We heard some good ideas for the next AGM. We've heard some good ideas about best practices.

We also might want to look at this: one of the things we tend to do as the Manitoba Chambers is go out and say you guys should do this and you guys should do that. But we don't say 'tell us your successes; let us celebrate your successes'. Maybe we need to think about how we take this event and turn it into a celebration of all chambers and all business awards across the province. It is going to take some planning, it is going to take some time, but it has the potential to unify us in a way that starts with the grassroots and evolves into a bigger celebration of those successes.

Question: This is my fifth Manitoba Chambers' AGM and I don't know if it is because I am getting older but the faces seem a little younger. One thing I do notice is I hear a lot of great successes in the room and a lot of great stories but it seems to be the committed chambers. How do we engage the chambers that aren't here? I think that is important too because they can help us in some areas and how do we support them?

Dan Overall: I think the first step is finding out what their needs are and making sure that we have a program that addresses those needs. That will create the point where they

develop the buy-in to be here. Part of our challenge is to get someone to devote a weekend and on top of that to have to pay to do so you need a relationship. You can't just say 'oh, you haven't heard from me for a year, how about plunking down x number of hundreds of dollars and a weekend for something that you haven't heard a lot about for the last year?' We need to develop that ongoing relationship so that there is a relevance to what we are doing and what they are doing.

The Have Province Initiative calls for the courage to ask the tough questions. We need to ask the tough questions about ourselves. Of the chambers that are not here how many times do they mention the Manitoba Chambers' activities at a Board meeting? If they are not talking about the Manitoba Chambers there is something wrong with that. How many people here mention what the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce is doing at their Board meeting? If you are not, that can't be a good thing. We need to find out if you are not and why not. That is the type of dialogue that we need to have.

First, confirm what the needs are from all local chambers. And then, the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce, as the umbrella organization, has to address those needs. That will develop the rapport and connection that ultimately leads to people being willing to give up both their time and money to attend events like this.

Question: We have to create a demand and then sell it. We have to raise value and then sell it.

David Angus: One of the things that is coming out of the Canadian Chamber process is we can probably do a better job of defining the chamber network based on value. I think there are different types of chambers and it goes back to how do we categorize different chambers and how do we offer value or programming based on their particular need. The Winnipeg Chamber is going to have different needs from the provincial body than a chamber that does not have staff, for example, or is focused on tourism.

We can do a better job of defining our market slice and creating a differential value proposition to identify each of those categories.

Question: As a media person I get your emails, I presume because they are media releases. Do you have a system in place where you have a battery of emails? Do you use that and do you have a list of all the members, including all businesses and chambers, that you can send emails to when the issue is of particular importance?

Dan Overall: We are in the process of developing that. Our challenge is the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce is doing so much we actually get complaints. Here is the evolution of it: it used to be that people would get three to four emails from us a week because we are doing so many things, then we decided we would combine them all into one email a week but of course it is this long email and people find it daunting, boring and too much information.

We are so diverse and we are grappling with so many issues that are only relevant to a finite portion of our membership. We have not been able to figure out how to communicate to people that want just a certain slice of what we do and not the whole pie, so to speak.

Certainly we would welcome any input you have on how we can improve our communications.

Question: In terms of appealing to the younger generation, it's more than just the appeal, it's more than just how meetings are run, I don't have \$10,000 today to advertise on the back of your handbook. When I started with the Headingly Chamber whoever had the most money at the table got to advertise. As soon as I became president that stopped because maybe I can't avoid advertising but I have a few hundred dollars that I could afford.

When you bring people on you need to ask yourselves 'what is the purpose of the meeting?', how are you running them - if it's 8:30 and the meeting is done I want out of there. Youth can bring so many great ideas, we love strategic planning. The next generation can bring so much and I have to challenge you as to whether you are bring the thirty-year olds, the twenty-year olds in a way that they want to be on your Board.

Dan Overall: I agree heartily with that for two reasons. One, I think a lot of that is the heart of the entrepreneurial spirit which is what we should be embracing as an organization. Number two, and Jeff Zabudsky can confirm this, a lot of the post-secondary institutions help people go through the system and then they are grateful for that development at a key moment in their lives; development that helped them go on to fame and fortune. They end up bequeathing lots of money to the institution. We had Paul Charette of Bird Construction who said Red River was absolutely critical to his ability to learn the skills that made him a great success and now he is providing hundreds of thousands of dollars back to Red River. Imagine if we not only embraced this youth, these young, budding entrepreneurs – which is what we are supposed to be about anyway – and actually helped them become successful.

Another example is Gord Peters of Cando. He has said the Brandon Chamber was absolutely critical to his development and he has given a lot back to that chamber.

It's one of those things where reaching out to the youth, those budding entrepreneurs, is not only the right thing to do it is the smart thing to do, and we need to do more of it.

Leonard Loboda: In summary what we have heard from the delegates and the panel is that the role going forward for the chamber of commerce is to engage, be relevant, share successes and provide value. If we do all that chances are we will be able to defy economic gravity, no matter what it brings our way.