

# Radical Change, One Step at a Time

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By: Kate Hawker, CAE, and Melissa Garcia, CAE

Incrementalism is boring, right? We learned in kindergarten that "slow and steady wins the race," but the concept of using incremental progress to make any kind of profound change seemed contradictory, or at the very least, long and dreadful. Didn't we all secretly want to be the hare?

Based on our experience at the Society for Neuroscience (SfN), we'd like to make a case for the tortoise. One of the great misconceptions about making incremental change is that doing nothing translates into passivity. This is not true. While an organization may "wait" to take a specific action until the right pieces are in place, progress should be a constant. If you relentlessly nudge many projects forward by small amounts, significant achievements can occur quickly. Chapter 63 of the *Tao Te Ching* reminds us, "In the universe great acts are made up of small deeds./ The sage does not attempt anything very big./ And thus achieves greatness."

Change does not have to equal revolution, and here we offer examples of recent progress at SfN as proof. Our positioning in five specific areas allowed the organization to make radical changes in the venues of journal publishing, membership growth, information systems, and printing over the course of a few years.

## Five Practices for Change

In the 10 years we've worked for SfN, no individual change has directly made a radical difference in how the organization runs. But by establishing a few organizationwide practices and instilling them in our day-to-day work, considerable improvements have been made. And today, when you step back and look at the organization, the landscape is quite different. The following principles made those changes possible:

1. **Be self-aware.** Just because something is needed doesn't mean that you are ready to do it now, successfully. The right pieces (or people) may need to be moved into (or out of) place before moving forward. This is done by being very honest with yourself about organizational strengths and weaknesses. While it can be uncomfortable for staff, take time to evaluate the bigger picture and assess your preparedness to make that leap.
2. **Have good information.** If you've read *7 Measures of Success*, you know that being data driven is a virtue, and it is also key in driving change. While many decisions must be made without full information, organizations must be dedicated to making the most informed decisions possible. By developing an appetite for data gathering and analysis and a well-constructed information strategy, fewer decisions need to be made in an information vacuum. Then, senior management should push to have data integrated into all reports and recommendations. Pretty quickly, this becomes a cultural norm.
3. **Be nimble.** Sticking to plans is an effective way to get things done. However, being too wed to predetermined paths means you may miss unexpected opportunities or fall victim to unanticipated roadblocks. Instead, have an intended trajectory and use an iterative approach of feedback and adjustment. There is a big difference between having a target and being target fixated.
4. **Develop goals and budgets from the bottom up.** Every organization has a budget and a goals process, but how connected are those processes and who is involved? If department heads or cost-center managers develop department-specific goals and budgets with their teams, staff members get a broad sense of organizational value and help keep costs under control, because they "own" their goals and take responsibility for delivery. A shared process also gives management a more granular look at business operations, making it more likely for managers to spot trends and intervene as needed.
5. **Exert pressure from the top to create incentives for staff to change.** Generally speaking, change doesn't happen by decree. But if management has high expectations of staff that seem to be at the edge of reasonable—aka, "strategic irrationality"—there's a better chance of high performance. Constantly challenge staff to conduct post-project evaluation and seek new and improved ways of conducting business. Soon enough, innovation and a desire to streamline and enhance systems and processes become a part of the culture.

As you'll see in the four examples below, SfN used these practices to make big changes in an incremental fashion and still in a relatively short period of time.

## An Evolving Publishing Model

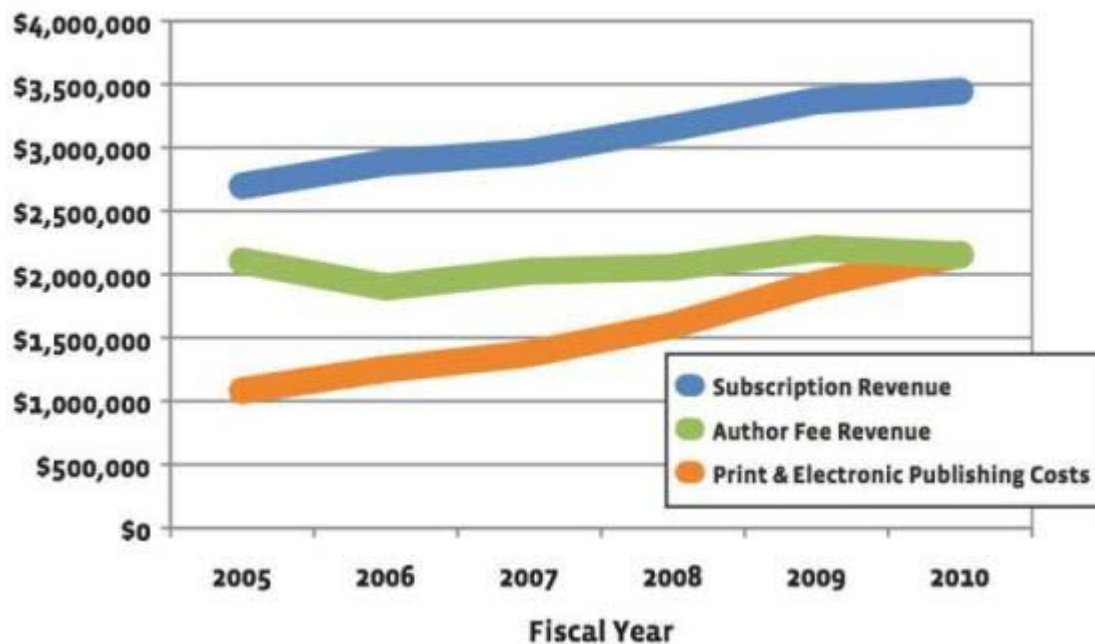
Since 2002, SfN's journal, *The Journal of Neuroscience*, has gone from losing money to being a primary source of organizational revenue. This was accomplished while print subscriptions were declining, which placed both subscription and advertising revenue streams in jeopardy; additionally, open access was fast becoming a major catalyst to change in the overall journal publishing environment. SfN made three modest decisions that, taken together, led to a dramatic change in the business model.

**Shift toward author fees.** The open-access debate allowed SfN to frame the discussion for volunteer leadership. Staff advocated for a shift in pricing strategy toward a model less dependent on institutional subscriptions and more dependent on author fees. The shift was intended to be gradual, preparing for a day when full open access might become a reality. An important innovation here was introducing a submission fee for all articles submitted for peer review—nearly 6,000 annually—not just the 25 percent accepted for publication.

**Price adjustments.** The second change was subscription pricing. In fact, two changes were made here. The first closed the gap between online-only and print-plus-online subscription pricing. Online only had been 70 percent of the print-plus-online subscription cost. In gradual steps, we moved that figure up to 90 percent, before the dramatic shift toward online only fully took hold. The other element was mindfulness of the financial pressures on libraries and institutional subscribers. SfN carefully calibrated annual pricing increases to just below the level at which libraries might consider canceling.

**Cost cutting.** The third change was relentlessly reducing publishing costs, including both print and electronic versions. We paid very close attention to budget details and continually negotiated with vendors. As a result, publishing costs have been flat over the past five years in absolute dollars, despite a 70 percent increase in articles published and pages printed.

## SfN PUBLISHING COSTS AND REVENUE



## A System (and Thirst) for Information

In February 2009, SfN launched its first association management system, a key element of the overall information strategy. While the organization needed an AMS for several years, we chose to wait before rolling it out. SfN had a clear, unflinching understanding of its own resources and capacity, and the waiting period was used to take several steps toward readiness.

One step was developing a compelling business case for an AMS implementation. In particular, we addressed what would be accomplished and why existing systems were not sufficient for the future. This ensured that all stakeholders, including the board, understood objectives and the need for such a substantial investment.

One of the most compelling arguments for an AMS was the top-down demand for accurate and timely information. Senior management often posed questions that could not be answered in the current data environment. Following the on-time and on-budget implementation of the AMS, a gradual but perceptible culture shift occurred, and the organization demonstrated a hunger for information at all levels. Even the technical expectations of staff have changed. More is now expected from data systems, and staff are more amenable to the drastic changes an AMS brings to day-to-day operations.

The other important step was the creation of a new department, Information and Decision Support, to handle these evolving technical and operational needs by managing the implementation and integration of information systems. A sister to but separate from the Technology Services department, Information and Decision Support focuses on executing the organization's information strategy and ensuring that all major data systems—membership, abstracts, journal, meeting registration, and so on—are implemented in a way that allows data to be moved around, analyzed, and used effectively and efficiently.

## **A Reduction in Conference Print Materials**

SfN's strategic plan commits to using technology to better serve members and to being environmentally responsible, both of which have a significant impact on print products. During every budget cycle, printing costs throughout the organization are closely scrutinized, and staff are encouraged to use print products as efficiently as possible. Over the past decade, SfN has eliminated a 700-page, 2.5-pound membership directory, as well as a 2,000-page, nine-pound abstract publication for our annual meeting. By providing robust, easy-to-use electronic versions, member satisfaction has been maintained.

Another small but effective change was the packaging and delivery of the annual-meeting program. After watching meeting attendees tear apart the three-pound print program for the annual conference into more manageable daily pieces, we decided to reformat the book. Instead of producing a single large volume, the program was printed in seven booklets: one with highlights, hotel, and travel information; one for each of the five days of the conference; and an author index. The booklets were then packaged together with a canvas bag. Members regarded this as a major improvement in the meeting experience. By observing how the members behaved at the conference and making changes accordingly, a small change led to significant results.

So what do you do when this drive to be more efficient about printing causes problems? Use the setbacks as an opportunity to facilitate progress, of course! At our 2005 annual meeting, SfN ran out of print programs. With 30,000 expected attendees, 25,000 programs were ordered, and a few thousand were mailed to attendees in advance, at their request. We incorrectly assumed that, because the program was already in some attendees' hands and that a great number of attendees had used the online program in the past, the number of print programs available onsite would suffice. Not so; extra programs were gone by the second day. During the meeting, staff developed and executed response plans, and overall, it was an effective meeting. Afterward, however, we used the incident to introduce a progression of small, almost imperceptible changes that are steps along the path toward eliminating print programs entirely. First we stopped premailing full sets of booklets and sent just the general information booklet instead. Then, we eliminated that information booklet and pushed attendees toward online content and resources.

Now, we distribute individual daily booklets onsite, upon request, rather than as fully packaged sets, all of which has reduced print quantities and lowered costs.

## **Incentives for Membership Growth**

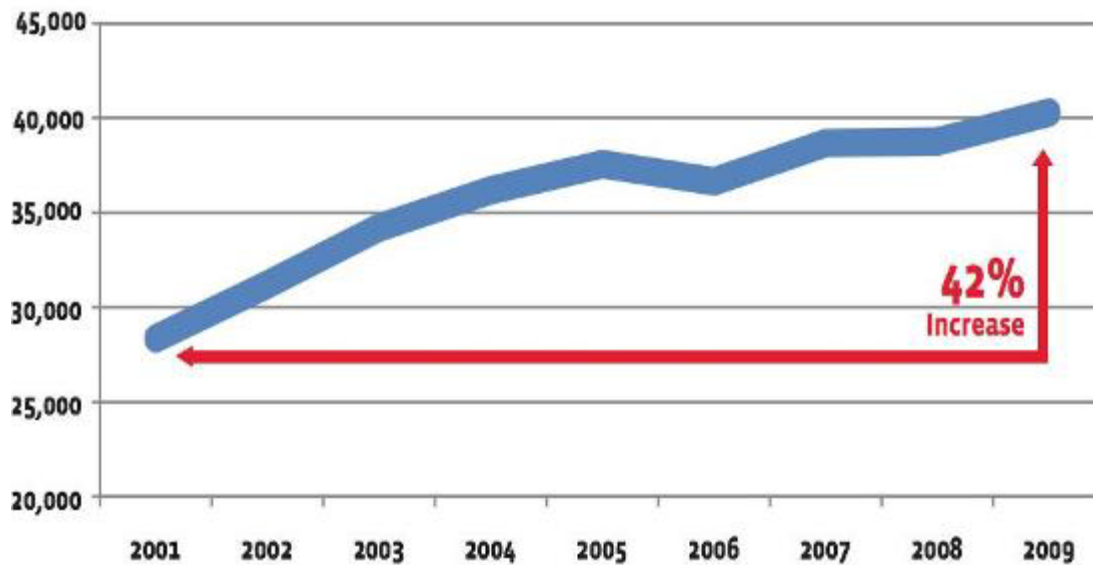
In the past eight years, SfN membership has increased by 42 percent. The growth is not a result of a single change or strategy but rather the result of numerous small steps and adjustments. SfN's board often discusses membership growth as a strategic issue, partly because it is seen as a proxy measurement for overall organizational health and because, generally, more members equals more revenue, which equals a greater ability to accomplish our mission.

As the board began to view membership through a more strategic lens, we decided to increase annual-meeting registration fees for nonmembers and decrease them for members—create a membership incentive, in other words. Key benefits were also made available only for members, such as early access to the annual-meeting housing block. With an average of 30,000 attendees competing for rooms, this turned out to be a significant benefit indeed and created a new leverage point to encourage nonmembers to join and members to renew.

Meanwhile, in analyzing data from various sources, it became clear to the organization's leadership that SfN's foreign member category was growing fast but that these members felt underserved. In response, the category was eliminated, and all members, regardless of location, became "regular" members with the same package of member benefits.

Additionally—and importantly—more emphasis was placed on creating specific value for international members. Catalyzed by this change, the international category is one of the fastest growing segments of SfN's membership.

## SfN MEMBERSHIP



The *Tao Te Ching* tells us that we may "achieve greatness in little things," and we hope these examples demonstrate just that. The four "little things" SfN carried out—which were in fact big things that were done as a relentless series of small changes—have had positive effects across the organization. Even though most were achieved at a tortoise's pace and in small pieces, they've made a big difference.

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## Sidebar: From the *Tao Te Ching*

By Lao Tsu

Translation by Gia Fu Feng and Jane English

### **Sixty-Three**

Practice non-action.

Work without doing.

Taste the tasteless.

Magnify the small, increase the few.

Reward bitterness with care.

See simplicity in the complicated.

Achieve greatness in little things.

In the universe the difficult things are done as if they are easy.

In the universe great acts are made up of small deeds.

The sage does not attempt anything very big,

And thus achieves greatness.

Easy promises make for little trust.

Taking things lightly results in great difficulty.

Because the sage always confronts difficulties,

He never experiences them.