Directors sometimes believe success will be measured by the number of programs they recommend. Many are innovative in their business settings and bring that trait to their board service. The phrase usually starts with, “I have a good idea...”

Anticipating that most board and committees will propose programs, it is prudent to have a process for review.

The Parking Lot

Maintain a “parking lot” as a place to put new ideas. The board chair might guide conversations by offering, “That’s something we could consider. It’s not in our current strategic plan but we can place it in the parking lot for contemplation.”

Further explaining that if and when resources become available the idea can be slated for review. Quite often a good idea that motivates board discussion today is forgotten in a few months or no longer seems practical.

Sunset Process

Adding a “sunset provision” to a program means it will be periodically assessed to determine continued need and value. In the future a task force will conduct a review and make recommendations to the board.

As proposals arise make it the practice to add a sunset provision. For instance, “At the end of two years the board will review the program to determine its value and to make a decision to keep, adapt or terminate.” By making it an automatic process it removes the politics and avoids the buildup associated with successive administrations adding favored programs.
Innovation Garage

Use “innovation garage” to schedule new ideas for review and enhancement before making a final recommendation. Limit the “size” of the garage to just two or three bays so it does not get backed up with ideas. The mechanics at the garage will be staff, volunteers and consultants.

This process allows for a review the proposal’s merits or shortcomings. The garage can be used for a complete overhaul of a new or existing program or just a tune-up. The team may make a recommendation to keep the idea with enhancements or take a realistic view and indicate it did not pass inspection. Some ideas will be moved to the junkyard while others will roll into the showroom.

Purposeful Abandonment

It may be time to hone the organization’s portfolio of programs, services and activities by redirecting resources to only a few signature offerings. Over time organizations add too many activities to their portfolio of services. Eventually, through environmental changes and other factors, programs lose value. It should not be assumed that adoption of a new benefit is intended for perpetuity.

A technique described as purposeful abandonment yields significant benefit, a process described in the book, Road to Relevance by Harrison Coerver and Mary Byers. It is a review of programs, events and activities to be sure they align with mission and goals, and have significant value.

The abandonment process is a collaborative effort of board and staff. It starts by checking that all activities are aligned with the mission and goals. Next decide if they have value to a majority of members or are too big a drain on resources. Be frank about program value, including indirect costs such as staffing, office space and risk. Recommendations will be to keep, adapt, or drop the programs--- freeing up resources.
Summary

Making the decision to launch or abandon programs is not easy. Every proposal has an economic impact as well as political attachments. Having processes in place to deal with new ideas will avoid their adoption simply because they were a “good idea” suggested by a committee or board.

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Note: The authors are Bob Harris, CAE, of www.nonprofitcenter.com and Andy Johnston, Vice President of Government & Corporate Affairs, Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce