Ensuring the Future of Bridge

We believe that bridge faces the serious risk of losing its status as a premier mind sport played by people of all ages and abilities around the world. The average age of the ACBL membership is 72 and members over the age of 80 outnumber members under the age of 35 by 20:1. Attendance at national and regional events is falling. Newspapers around the world are dropping their bridge columns, most recently the NY Times.

There are those who disagree that bridge is facing a crisis and others who believe that there is nothing that can be done. They may both be right, but conceding defeat without even trying the finesse or developing a backwash squeeze is not an option. We need strenuous action and soon. If it fails so be it.

Situation

Forecasting the future always rests to some extent on trying to extrapolate what is happening now and doing this is both risky and cannot exclude the bias of the forecaster, for example in selecting which data to give greater weight.

Unexpected events sometimes make forecasters look foolish. In 1894 The Times newspaper anticipating the continued reliance on horse drawn transportation predicted that by 1950 every street in London would be buried 9 feet deep in horse manure. Two years later, Karl Benz was granted a patent for the automobile.

There are those who say we should keep doing what we are doing now: encouraging juniors and trying to get bridge into the schools. The results to date are not encouraging, but maybe there is a Karl Benz discontinuity just ahead. If the “steady as she goes” proponents are right bridge will continue as it does now with the ACBL at around 165,000 members. If they are wrong, in a few short years the average age of the membership will be even closer to the actuarial life expectancy of the US population and the locus of bridge events will move from NABCs and Regionals to Assisted Care facilities.

The situation is complicated by the existing structure of the ACBL. An unwieldy board of 25 people representing a variety of constituencies makes decision making very difficult. With such a large board with a range of backgrounds it is inevitable that priorities get confused and the board ends up getting involved in a wide range of issues, many of which should not even be elevated to the board level. The future role of the board should be limited to: i) setting strategy; ii) recruiting the senior executives needed to implement the strategy; iii) providing guidance on its implementation; and iv) monitoring performance against plan.

What the ACBL should do

When urgent action is needed it is important to have the equivalent of a “hundred day plan”. The following is our suggestion, recognizing that it may take more than 100 days, but certainly not more than 200.
1. Streamline the decision process by reducing the size of the board to say 8 – 12 people.

2. Reform the Board of Governors to ensure that the interests of the Districts are properly represented and involve them in key decisions affecting the districts.

3. Define the Objective

   First, decide what the ACBL wants to achieve, and think about the time horizon to be considered. This will be driven by the scale of the plans and scenarios that to be tested.

   For Example: The ACBL may decide that it wants to add 10,000 new members within three years. Within that broad goal there may be sub goals, including:
   a. arresting and then reversing the increasing average age of the membership;
   b. increasing the attention of bridge clubs to social and rubber bridge players;
   c. targeting recently retired or about to retire baby boomers.

4. Gather Data

   Data is essential to both identify the issues and to persuade the skeptics of the need to change. It is also essential to avoid evaluator bias. For example, when assessing responsiveness of bridge clubs to new members or the ACBL to member requests, we should not have top experts conduct the surveys because it is evident that the reaction to Bob Hamman will be very different to the response to Jane or Bill Smith. Assessment must be built on evidence not than supposition.

   a. Start by understanding the trends among the existing member base.
   b. Track the experience of the member base in dealing with the ACBL, with tournament directors, with local bridge clubs on the first visit, etc.
   c. Evaluate the successes and failures of international bridge bodies in attracting new members.
   d. Examine the successes and failures of comparable organizations. My favorite is the National Mah Jongg League. (I have never played the game and do not expect I ever will – but they have been much more successful than the ACBL in growing their game).
   e. Assess costs of various outreach programs. Once again benchmarking the results of other countries and other mind sports.
   f. Evaluate the potential of technology and its impact on other mind sports.

5. Develop Initial Plans and Alternatives

   a. Do not let other successful programs evade your eyes …. in other words plagiarize. Ideas that have worked for others should be adapted and evaluated. (management consultants call this “best practices”).
   b. Identify the key factors that may affect the plan, or its implementation.
   c. Modify successful programs from others to fit the North American bridge environment.
   d. Identify the key assumptions on which the plan depends.
6. Estimate the costs of the alternative plans and the time required to implement the various elements
   a. Cost each element of the various programs;
   b. Identify the specific targets of each program and the rate of implementation;
   c. Identify milestones and intermediate check points to evaluate the success of each program.

7. Evaluate organizational capabilities against plan requirements. Ensure that the organization has the ability to implement the chosen plan with the necessary:
   a. Structure
   b. Systems
   c. Staff and Skills

8. Develop detailed plans, including:
   a. Time lines for the various projects;
   b. Measurable progress points;
   c. Individual responsibly for each element.

Maximizing the prospects of success?

Successful change is hard to manage particularly in the early stages. There are a few things that can be done to maximize the probability of succeeding:

A. Create a dedicated group to drive the change process and establish the right incentives to make sure they are motivated to succeed.

B. Streamline the reporting structure so that the implementation group can get quick responses and approvals.

C. Identify attainable short term goals and then broadly share the evidence of these early “wins”. For example find a best practice method of managing Swiss tournaments and then implement it quickly so the members can see the benefits of the change process.

D. Emphasize speed over perfection – do it, try it, fix it.

The bottom line:

To make change happen will need the concerted efforts of dozens and even hundreds of people. In an organization which consists largely of volunteers getting commitment is a huge challenge. The only way that will happen is if each of them believes that: i) change is necessary; ii) the proposed plan is a good one; and iii) their role is valuable / important.

How is that done? In a word – data. Rigorous fact-based analysis.
Follow Up Email

Good Evening all,

We have had numerous responses from committed ACBL members, not all of them regular tournament players. There is universal agreement that "something needs to be done urgently". Several of the respondents are skeptical of the prospects for the process proposed and even for the very survival of bridge. To them we say, we may not succeed but surrender is not an option. Others have questioned the approach, including the changes to the board structure which many think will take an inordinate amount of time.

We thought it would be helpful to clarify our goals.

Ensuring the future of bridge would be easy if there were a silver bullet that solved the whole problem and we could hire some mystical Lone Ranger to go out and 'make it happen'. Unfortunately restoring bridge as a flourishing mind sport, if it can be done, will take a long time and involve a myriad of decisions along the way. It is our belief that a 25 person board is not what is needed to make the thoughtful and quick decisions that will be needed.

We are not asserting that the current board are doing anything less than their very best for the game. We believe that they are dedicated individuals who are striving for exactly the same goals as all of us. The results to date must be a huge disappointment to them.

What we are saying is that we need to streamline the decision process and add to the board people with knowledge of information technology, marketing and other functional skills. To facilitate rapid change we are asking the current board to step aside in the interest of the game we all love. Our proposal is not in any way meant to be a 'put down' of their efforts and we anticipate asking some of them to join the reconstituted board.

One last point to clarify is the emphasis on rigorous fact based analysis. Change is hard. In the private sector one can motivate people to change with a combination of carrot and stick. It is much harder in a not-for-profit organization. The ACBL relies heavily on the generous amount of time donated by thousands of volunteers. To keep them motivated through the process all changes need to be based on popular consensus. We have the good fortune that most of our members are literate and intelligent. (Some of their actions at the bridge table might belie this assertion). Absent a rabble rousing leader the clearest way to build consensus for significant change is to use fact based analysis to demonstrate why the proposed actions are necessary / desirable.

We are greatly heartened by the universal agreement on the need for change. Now the challenge is to turn the collective energy of our members into an action plan. We thank you for your time and look forward to working with you all.

Regards,
Stefanie Scott on behalf of Bob Hamman, Paul Street, and Alan Graves