

An AAUW Taste of Success

Our Marshalltown (Iowa) AAUW Branch uses a collaborative leadership team model which was implemented in 1999 when the nominating committee could find no one to run for President. That year the branch had no election. The past president and some other officers and a couple of active members met in early summer to talk about how to proceed. The conversation took the path of shared leadership, and a three-person leadership team emerged in lieu of president and vice-president.

At first we admit to making decisions on an as-needed basis as we tried to keep the organization stable. To most members, it was somewhat unchanged with the same calendar of meetings and usual local-level projects. We did abandon having a business meeting component of our monthly meetings—much to the joy of everyone—so we had no need for a presiding officer.

Some of the programming ideas that emerged empowered us. Our theme for 2001-2002 was “*Hat’s Off to the Women of AAUW.*” Everyone who joined (renewals or new) was given a hat—a simple straw-type garden hat that cost only a couple of dollars at our local Wal-Mart. We used the tag line: “AAUW is just one of the hats I wear.” A year later, when our theme was, “*Hold Onto Your Hat...in Times of Change,*” our programs helped us celebrate and work with change. We tried to shape our AAUW branch to let change energize us so, in a time-stressed culture, we could be more than survivors. Our interactive planning stimulated creativity and a commitment to meet the needs of members/potential members.

At first we used some gimmicks to get everyone involved in planning, including an AA-YOU-W-opoly game one year. Now the leadership team schedules a couple of planning meetings in June and July open to all members. These planning sessions take us beyond social friendships to collaborative relationships with shared ownership in the process and the outcomes, especially the programming and action projects. We brainstorm and let momentum build. We don’t vote but use consensus. As decisions are made for programs, we put them on a calendar with names of volunteers to coordinate each meeting. As action projects are chosen, project coordinators emerge.

Our community has a population of about 27,000 and many women’s clubs. Our branch welcomes new members and understands the need to bring in new ideas and younger women; but we find our growth through the AAUW mission rather than identifying ourselves as a women’s club. Younger generations of women want to make a difference in the world—they are the ones who lend support to post-Katrina projects or go off to aid Tsunami victims or volunteer for soup kitchen shifts in homeless shelters. Our branch has mission projects, too—*Latinas al Exito*, Recognition of Women Who Make a Difference, Mentoring At-Risk Students, Conversations With College Women—that is how we gain our growth.

One important benefit of the process is the deliberate dialogue about how to proceed. In our experience, the conversation led to discovery about what it means to be in AAUW and how to collectively shape the future of our branch.

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Transitioning AAUW Branch Leadership: From Elected Officers to Leadership Team

Question: If no one wants to be AAUW Branch President, you should

- Disband the branch
- Extend the term of the current president
- Twist someone’s arm until she says yes
- [Look at alternative leadership models](#)

Answer: To strengthen your branch, an alternative model may be the best answer.

Step 4: Enjoy the Benefits

Shared ownership in the process strengthens commitment, program, and mission.

Step 3: Activate the Team

Form a leadership team to provide oversight of all activities. Consider using collaborative decision making instead of parliamentary procedure.

Step 2: Share the Vision

Be creative about selling the change to members. Acknowledge the need for change. Use communication tools and branch events to aid the process

Step 1: Start Talking

Talk about the possibility of shared leadership. Include all active members of your branch. Ask: What is AAUW? What is our mission? How can we reshape our branch to share responsibilities and oversight?

